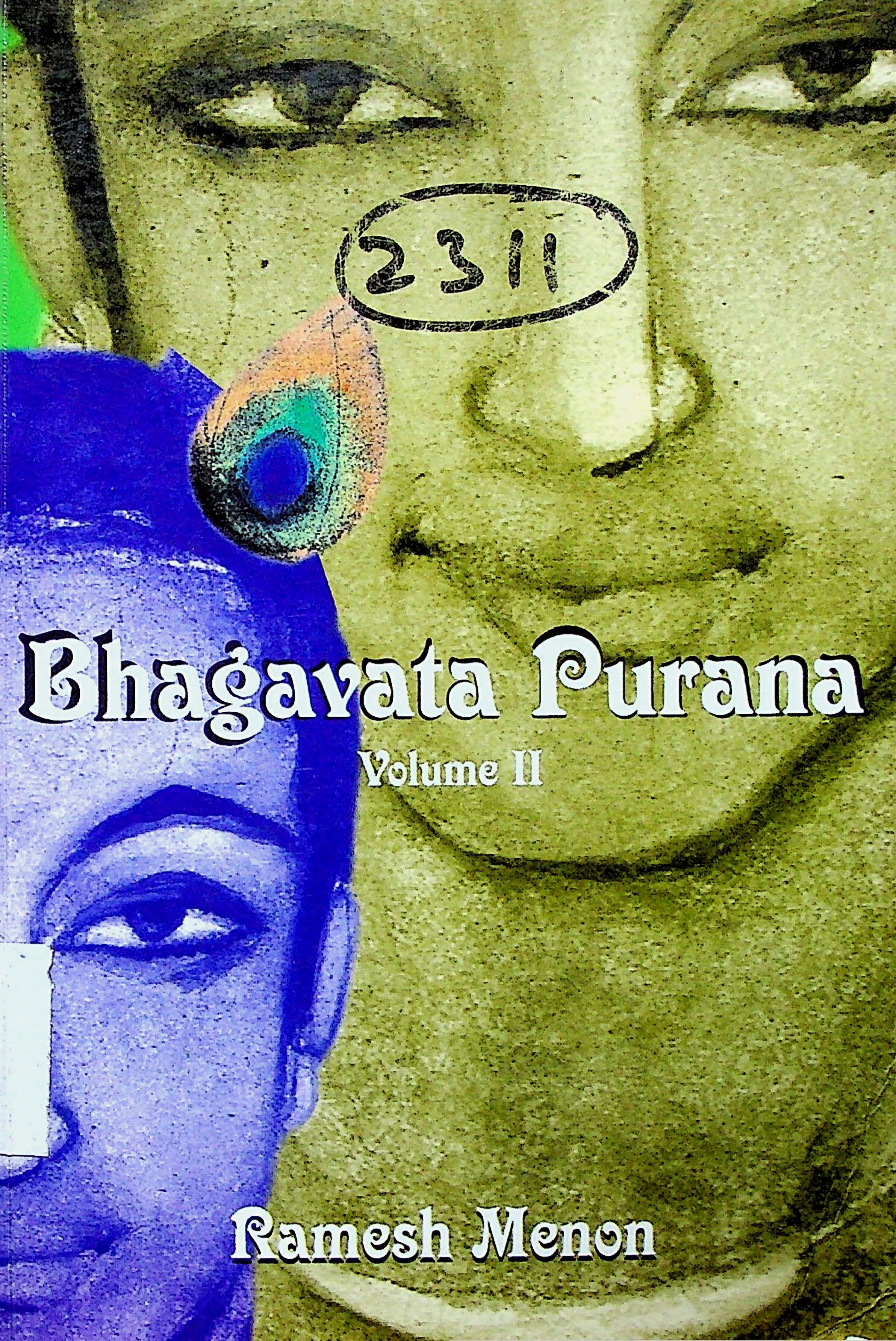

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Bhagavata Purana

Volume II

Ramesh Menon

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BHAGAVATA PURANA

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The Complete Mahabharata: Vol. I Adi Parva

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VOLUME TWO

RAMESH MENON

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Skandha 10

KRISHNA

THE SUTA UGRASRAVAS SAID TO THE RISHI SAUNAKA, 'KING PARIKSHIT said, "My lord, you have been gracious enough to tell me about the royal dynasties of the Sun and the Moon, and the exceptional deeds of the kings of both houses. You have described the race of Yadu, most pious of kshatriyas. I beg you, tell me now about the life of Vishnu's Avatara who incarnated himself as a Yadava. Tell me also about the Lord Balarama, his half-brother.

Ah, only a murderer could keep from listening to the blessed life of Krishna, of untold splendour, whose glory jivanmuktas endlessly sing, those who are free from desire. For this is not merely delightful to the senses and the mind, it is the finest specific for the sickness called samsara.

His blessed feet were the raft upon which my ancestors, the sons of Pandu, crossed the deadly ocean that was the Kaurava army – as easily as if it were a puddle of rainwater. That sea had kshatriya-whales in it like Bheeshma, who had vanquished the Devas in battle.

Tell me, ah tell me about the transcendent Lord, who came into his bhakta, my mother's, womb, subtly, with his Sudarshana chakra, and saved me, when Drona's son Aswatthama loosed the brahmasirsa at the foetus that I was. I became the only surviving seed of the Pandava tree.

Most knowing and learned Suka, tell us about the awesome powers of that God, who incarnated himself as a man, who is the One that dwells within and without all beings as Kaala, limitless Time. Tell me about Him, who makes those who seek him within themselves immortal, and damns them whose desires overwhelm them to always seek pleasure outside themselves, to death.

You said that the Lord Balarama, Samkarshana's Avatara, was Rohini's son. Then how was he born from Devaki's womb, without assuming a second body? Why did Krishna leave his father's house and go to live in Vraja, with the cowherds? When did he live, then, with his kinsmen and family?"

The questions came tumbling out, in spate, as if he could not stop them. Parikshit went on, "Tell me everything that Kesava did, both in Vraja and in Mathura. I have heard that he killed Kamsa, who was his mother's brother: a sin for a kshatriya. Why did he do this? How many years did he live among the Yadus in that human form?

I am told that he had many wives. How many were they, truly? Ah, omniscient Suka, tell me all these things about the Lord, answer all my questions I beg you. I have neither eaten a morsel of food nor drunk a sip of water, yet I feel no thirst or hunger, when by now they should have been intolerable pangs. Surely, it is the amrita of the Lord's Purana, which flows from your sweet lips, that makes me immune!"

Suka, greatest of bhaktas, said, "How wonderful your questions are, O King!" Then he began to narrate the life and the deeds of Sri Krishna, which have the power to erase the evil hold the kali yuga exerts over the mind.

Sri Suka said, "Greatest of Rajarishis, your intelligence is set upon the high path to wisdom! So quickly you have developed an intense and tireless desire to listen to the legends of the Lord Hari. I say to you, Rajan, even as the Ganga, which flows from His feet, purifies everything she touches, so do such ardent questions about Vishnu purify him that asks, him that answers and they that perchance overhear the replies.

So listen, O Parikshit, to the Krishna Avatara. Asuras, born in human form as violent and sinful kshatriyas, tyrannised the earth in a tide of terror and blood. Bhumi Devi could not bear what they did and came to Brahma for redress. She came as a shining cow, sobbing, and stood before the Pitamaha and told him her tale of woe in the most piteous way.

Brahma called Rudra and the Devas, and taking the Earth with them, they flew to the shore of the Kshirasagara, the ocean of milk upon which

Mahavishnu lies. There, Brahma concentrated his mind in dhyana and chanted the Purushasukta to invoke the Paramatman, Lord of all the worlds, God of the Gods, who blesses his bhaktas.

As he sat in dhyana, Brahma heard a voice in his heart and he told the Devas what it said. 'Devas, this is what the Lord commands you and bids you do as he asks immediately. The Lord already knows about the sorrows of Bhumi Devi. He means to incarnate himself to lighten her burden of evil, for he will use his great power that we call Kaala, all-devouring Time, to remove her misery.

He asks you Devas to be born into the clan of the Yadava, in amsa, to help him fight the war against evil for as long as he himself remains in the world. Narayana will be born in the home of Vasudeva and he asks the Apsaras to be born there as well, to serve his pleasure. Hari says that to please him Adisesha, thousand-hooded and self-lustrous, not separate from him, will be born before him: also as Vasudeva's son and the Lord's elder brother.

The Lord's Maya will also take birth briefly in the world, to achieve a purpose of his.'

Thus spoke Brahma to the Devas, who were all concerned about the wretched condition of the earth. The Creator consoled Bhumi with kindly words, saying that her burden would soon be removed. With this, Brahma vanished back to Satyaloka, where he dwells."

Sri Suka paused, then continued, "Once, in the city of Mathura there was a king called Surasena. He was a descendant of Yadu and he ruled that city and all the lands of the Surasenas. From that time, Mathura became the capital of the Yadava kings.

Vasudeva was a prince in the line of Sura and he married Devaki in the city of Mathura. Devaki's father Devaka gave her a dowry of two hundred young, richly attired, bejewelled sakhis, four hundred elephants caparisoned in gold, fifteen thousand horses, and a thousand and eight hundred chariots.

After the wedding, Vasudeva and his new bride climbed into the bridal chariot and they set out for Vasudeva's home city at the head of this great procession, which was Devaka's dowry to his daughter. Ugrasena's son Kamsa wanted to please his cousin Devaki, and he climbed onto the chariot-head and took the horses' reins. Conches boomed and drumrolls echoed through Mathura, as the wedding party set forth.

Suddenly, Kamsa heard an asariri, an ethereal voice speak above all the other noises, silencing them. The voice said, *'Asyaastvaam ashtamo garbho hantha yaam vahasebadhu!' Fool, the eighth-born son of the woman you drive in the chariot will kill you.*

Evil Kamsa, bane of the Bhojas, sprang down, sword in hand. He seized Devaki by her hair and dragged her down from the chariot to kill her. Knowing how cruel and past any scruples Kamsa was, knowing he was a murderer, the noble and pure Vasudeva said to pacify him, 'How can you even think of killing your own sister, and that on the day of her wedding? You Kamsa, whom the brave extol, who have brought such fame to the Bhojas? Kshatriya, death is certain for all that are born; why death takes birth with the body and it may come today or after a hundred years, whenever ordained – but certain it is.

When death is near, the soul, compelled by old karma, leaves an old body and enters a new one. Even as a man walking will lift one leg from the ground behind him when he has planted his other leg firmly in front of him – or as the caterpillar, the trinajakula, moves – the jivatma behaves at the time of death.

Death is like a dreamer assuming a dream body, when he becomes absorbed in the sights and sounds of his dream, so that he forgets his waking body. It is like a deep reverie from which one does not return. When the jiva identifies with its new body and forgets the old one, the old one is said to die.

Indeed, suddenly overtaken by ancient, even forgotten karma, the soul leaps into identifying itself with a new body, and leaves its old body and its attachments behind, their purpose now over. A new body forms by the power of maya, which generates the five elements in accordance with karma. Then the soul takes birth with these freshly formed qualities.

If, while you watch reflections of the sun or the moon in a vessel of water, the wind disturbs the water, it will seem that the luminaries are moving, while in fact only their shadows do. So, also, the jiva is deluded when he identifies himself with a body he takes by karma and by the Lord's maya.

O Kamsa, let a man who desires his own welfare never cause injury to another; for if you hurt anyone they shall seek revenge from you in this life and Yama will punish you in the next one. Look at this girl, Devaki your sister, terrified, and helpless as a doll before you. It is not worthy of you even to dream of killing such an innocent!'

Demonic Kamsa did not relent, but still seemed bent on killing Devaki, who had dissolved into tears by now. Vasudeva mind raced, in the moment that seemed to last a lifetime: 'Death can often be turned away with intelligence or strength. If I fail in my attempt, no blame shall attach to me. Let me promise to hand all our unborn children over to him, for him to kill, if this will save her life now.

After all, perhaps we shall have no children. Perhaps Kamsa will die before we do or, indeed, our child will kill him as the voice said. No one can change God's will. The need of the moment is to escape the death that faces us immediately. It is all that I can do, and if that death come again I will not be responsible for it.

In a forest fire, some trees burn down while others next to them are left unsinged – it is a mystery why this happens. So, too, is the birth and the death of any living being.'

Vasudeva prostrated before the raging Kamsa. His heart wept within him but outwardly he smiled and said to the demon, 'Precious Prince, you have no cause to fear her, for I swear that I will hand every child born to us to you. After all, the asariri did not say that Devaki threatens you, but only a child born to her.'

Kamsa lowered his sword; it seemed that even he was reluctant to murder a woman and his cousin, whom he loved in his way, as much as he did anyone. Vasudeva sang the monster's praises, how wise and merciful he was. Then, quickly mounting the chariot and taking Devaki with him, before Kamsa changed his mind, he rode away to his home.

They say that Devaki possessed divine qualities within her. In nine years, she gave birth to eight sons and a daughter. The grief-stricken, helpless Vasudeva brought his firstborn, Kirtiman, to Kamsa as he had sworn to. Ah, what is impossible for a truly wise man to do? What desire exists that he cannot overcome? What possession is there that one who knows the Atman cannot sacrifice?

Alas, what sin is there to which an evil man will not stoop? Yet, when Vasudeva brought his firstborn to Kamsa, the asura was pleased that he had kept his word. Kamsa said, 'The threat to my life is only from your eighth-born child. I have no wish to kill this son of yours. Take him home to Devaki.'

Vasudeva did so, but he was uneasy in his heart; he did not trust Kamsa and his fears proved well founded.

Great and inscrutable destiny must always be fulfilled. Narada Muni arrived in Mathura's palace and whispered to Prince Kamsa, 'I trust you know about the conspiracy that has been hatched against the race of Asuras, to which you belong. The Devas mean to rid the Earth of the very race of kshatriyas. Nanda's gopa cowherds support Vasudeva and Devaki. Many of these, and many Yadavas, too, who go as your kinsmen, and their women, are Devas and Apsaras born in amsa. They say that the Asura kings of the earth have become a burden upon Bhumi Devi, and they mean to kill you and your allies.'

With these intimations and dark hints that Vishnu himself would be born to cleanse the earth in a vast bloodletting, Narada left Mathura; from that day, though, Kamsa began to look upon all the Yadavas as his deadly enemies. He had Devaki and Vasudeva flung in prison. Then on, whenever Devaki delivered a child, Kamsa slaughtered the infant as soon as it was born, suspecting it to be Vishnu's Avatara come to kill him.

Indeed, noble Parikshit, it has always been commonplace for rulers of the earth to kill anyone they suspect are a threat to them and will usurp their thrones – be they not parents, siblings, friends and wellwishers.

Kamsa knew that he himself was the mighty Asura Kalanemi, reborn in the royal house of Mathura after Vishnu slew him. He also knew that Vishnu would come again to kill him once more and he began to persecute the clan into which Hari's Avatara would be born. He began to torment his father's people, the Yadavas. Why, he deposed his father, King Ugrasena, cast him into prison as well, and assumed sovereignty over Mathura and the kingdom and the ancient lands of the Surasenas."

BEFORE THE LORD'S BIRTH

SRI SUKA SAID, "KAMSA'S POWER GREW AND HE MARRIED THE TWO daughters of another great and evil king of the world – Jarasandha of Magadha. With his father-in-law's support, Kamsa persecuted the Yadavas viciously and many of them left their homes in Mathura to flee into exile.

Among Kamsa and Jarasandha's allies and part of the conspiracy that held tyrannical sway over the Earth were some kings and some demons that lived in the wilds, ranging over the world as they pleased. Main among these were Pralamba, Baka, Chanura, Trinavarta, Aghasura, Mushtika, Arishta, Dvividha who had once been a good vanara who fought for Sri Rama on Lanka, the rakshasi Putana, Kesi, Dhenuka and even great Asura sovereigns like Narakasura and Bana.

The persecuted Yadavas fled into nearby kingdoms like those of the Panchala, the Kuru, the Kekaya, Salva, Vidarbha, Nishada, Videha, Kosala, and others as well, whose kings were not inimical toward them. However, compelled by circumstances, many of Kamsa's near kinsmen stayed on in Mathura, serving the savage monarch.

When Kamsa killed Devaki's first six babies, as soon as they were born, she conceived yet again. Now she became pregnant with the amsa of Anantasesha, she bore the awesome Balarama in her womb. She felt such uncanny delight, yet she was afraid, as well, at how powerful the child within her was and that Kamsa would kill this infant also.

In a transcendent realm, Mahavishnu called his Yogamaya and said to her, 'Devi, Vasudeva's wife Rohini has sought sanctuary from Kamsa's terror in Vraja, where Nanda's cowherds dwell. Not just she, but countless Yadavas have escaped Mathura for fear of their very lives and hidden themselves in diverse places.

My amsa Sesha has manifested himself in Devaki's womb. Remove him from there, O Goddess, and place him in Rohini's body. When you have done this, I shall enter Devaki's womb myself and you must incarnate yourself in Nanda's wife, Yasodha's body.

Devi, you shall become the Goddess of all our bhaktas that seek boons, for you shall grant them whatever they want. They will worship you with incense, flowers and offerings of food. Men shall found temples to you across the sacred land of Bharata and adore you as Durga, Bhadrakali, Vijayaa, Vaishnavi, Kumuda, Chandika, Krishnaa, Madhavi, Kanyaka, Maya, Narayani, Isani, Sharada, Ambika and a thousand others.

The foetus that you remove from Devaki's body to place in Rohini's will be known as Samkarshana – he that is drawn out of the womb. He will be called Rama because he will be the joy of the world, and Bala because of his untold strength.'

When the Lord commanded her, the Goddess made a worshipful pradakshina around him. She then flew down to the earth to serve the mission he had given her. The Devi Yogamaya took the embryo that was Balarama out of Devaki's womb and put it in Rohini's body. The people, who had heard the disembodied voice's prophecy on the day of her wedding and also seen what Kamsa did to her first six infants, said sadly that Devaki had aborted her seventh child in fear.

The same night, Vishnu himself entered Vasudeva's mind in an essential form – amsabhagena. With Vishnu's power in him, Vasudeva shone forth so brightly that the awed people around him could neither go near him nor avoid gazing at him. Thus, he, Surasena's son, impregnated Devaki with the Avatara of the God who dwells everywhere in all beings, in all things.

She received the divine seed, that immortal spark, even as the horizon does the moon. Yet, though she shone like a full moon with the splendour of the child, the world did not see that lustre because she was locked away in the dungeon into which Kamsa had her flung. She was like a lamp hidden in a pot, or the knowledge of a scholar who will not share what he knows.

Kamsa, who would visit her occasionally, saw how luminous she was, lighting up the entire house, where he kept her locked in the basement. He knew, 'I have never seen her aglow like this. For sure, Hari, who the voice said would kill me, is inside her.' Kamsa was terrified, 'What shall I do? I feel certain that Vishnu, who will incarnate himself to help the Devas, will accomplish what he has come for.

How can I kill a pregnant woman, and my cousin besides? I would irreparably harm myself: my reputation, my wealth, and in time my very life. The Rishis say he that prolongs his life by such savagery is a dead man though he lives and breathes. Those around him curse such a man while he draws breath and when he dies he finds hell, which awaits all such sinners.'

Frightened of the consequences, Kamsa refrained from killing Devaki. Now, the thought of Vishnu the Saviour was perpetually in his mind, obsessing him – the thought of the one that would be born to kill him. Extraordinarily, the evil Kamsa thought of nothing but Hari – when he sat, lay down, stood, ate, walked, and he dreamt of him – until he saw the world full of the Lord: albeit, with utmost hatred and enmity.

Brahma and Parameshwara, the Rishi Narada and some others, the Devas and Gandharvas now came to Mahavishnu, granter of blessings and boons, and hymned him thus:

'*Satyavratam satyaparam trisatyam satyasya yonim nihitam cha satye;*

Satyasya satyamrita satyanetram satyatmakam tvam sharnam prapanna…

Your will Truth, your form Truth, Truth in the three times, you are the source of Truth and you are the essence of Truth. The world we perceive as being real is founded in your Truth; Truth is your eyes and we seek sanctuary in you, who are the soul of Truth.

This life is an ancient and mighty tree, whose trunk is Prakriti, its two fruits pleasure and pain. The three gunas are its three great roots; dharma, artha, kama and moskha are its four saps. The five vital airs are its greater aerial roots; the essences of which it is made are hunger, thirst, grief, delusion, old age and death.

The tree has seven barks, the dhatus of the body – skin, blood, flesh, albumen, bone, marrow and semen. It has eight great branches: the five elements, the mind, the intellect and the ego. It has nine hollows, the orifices of the body, and ten leaves: the ten organs of cognition and action.

The Jiva and Ishwara are the two birds that sit upon this tree of life. You, the Primal One, are the soil in which it grows. You are the Truth in which it is founded, you that are the origin and the saviour. Those whose minds are darkened by your maya see this world only as being diverse, myriad, but the wise see its unity in you.

They see that you who are pure consciousness, Chit, assume many forms, all of sattva, to incarnate yourself in this world of numberless forms and beings. These Avataras fill the good with joy, but bring doom to the evil.

Lotus-eyed Hari, those that have absorbed their minds in a single point – the thought of you, in whom the universe abides – easily cross the fearful sea of samsara. They do so even as if it were a patch of rainwater made in a cow's hoofmark! For the thought of your feet is their raft and the example of great men is what they follow.

Self-lustrous Lord, the Mahatmans who have crossed the ocean of births and deaths, of delusions, leave their raft behind for others to use. That craft is the tradition of bhakti, which they fashion by their lives and their teachings, to save jivas of the future.

O Lotus Eyes, there are philosophers, too, who think of themselves as great souls and as being liberated. Yet, these have not an iota of bhakti for you and have dark hearts, without restraint or grace. When fortune favours these briefly they might well evolve slightly along the path of the spirit. Yet they soon fall back into darkness because they do not cling to your holy feet, which are in truth men's only sanctuary along the way of the spirit.

O Madhava, those that bind themselves to you with thongs of love never fall. They have your protection, and the greatest obstacles along the way bend their heads for the pilgrim to set foot on. Your Incarnations are all suddha sattva in form, benign and easy for your bhaktas to worship, while you lead them as both God and Avatara toward moksha.

Men worship you diversely during the different asramas of their lives. The brahmacharin studies the Veda; the grihasta cleaves to his dharma and performs daily rituals. The vanaprastha meditates; and the Sannyasin, having passed through the other stages, finds communion with you in samadhi.

You, in your many forms, enable these different kinds of worship. The mystery of the Avatara is that by incarnation you help your devotees transcend duality and to unite with you directly by the path of love. No amount of analysis of life or nature can reveal the final truth, but at best a shadowy, distant glimmer of you. He that purifies his heart in the fire of bhakti actually finds you, and then becomes free.

Why, with mere reason, not even your Avataras can remotely be fathomed. You are yourself the witness of the faculties that attempt such comprehension. Yet, when a man resorts to devotion, listening to your legends, your qualities being described, chanting your names, fixing their minds upon your many forms – such a man always overcomes delusion and is freed from the cycle of transmigrations.

Lord, you have been born now and this earth, which is an infinitesimal creation of yours, will quickly be free of her burden of evil. Ah, we are the luckiest of all: who can perceive heaven and earth as reflections of your grace, upon which we see your shining footprints.

Lord, it is not because of karma that you are born into this samsara. It is merely your sport, your pleasure and will. While, for jivatmas, they are born, die and are born again by the power of your avidya: the ignorance that binds them, birth after birth. Not so you that are the lord of all siddhis, of maya and this sea of time. Only from a divine sense of play do you come to the Earth, incarnate.

Even as you came as the Matsya, the Kuurma, Hayagriva, Varaha, Narasimha, Sri Rama, Parasurama and Vamana, you have incarnated yourself now as a man – to save us all from evil and lighten the burden of Bhumi Devi.'

They turned to Devaki and sang to her, 'O Mother, how fortunate you are that God has entered your womb as a child! Do not fear Kamsa anymore; he shall die soon, for your son will be the saviour of the Yadavas.'

Thus they hymned the Purusha, the Brahman who is apart from anything that we experience with our senses and our minds. Then, led by Brahma and Siva, the Devas and the other immortal ones returned to their heavens."

THE BIRTH OF KRISHNA

SRI SUKA SAID, "THEN, THERE ARRIVED A MOST AUSPICIOUS NIGHT, when the Nakshatra Rohini was rising and the stars and planets were all in perfectly benign and powerful aspects, such as they are once or twice in a yuga. They shone down brilliantly upon the Earth.

Every human settlement, town, village and deep quarry beneath the world's surface, all felt a great current of hope course through them, setting alight the hearts of man, woman and child, of bird and beast.

The sacred rivers of the world flowed with crystalline water that sparkled as never before. Every lake, tank and pool bloomed with a feast of lotuses, all unfurled for this birth of births. Forests hummed with excited bees, and tree and vine were laden with an extraordinary, often unseasonable, festival of flowers.

Calm, joyous and soft zephyrs swept the world, clear and fragrant. The fires of sacrifices in the hearths of Rishis burned soft and steady. All the righteous felt great peace surge in their hearts, in tide; but not the incarnate demons, Kamsa and his kind. Dundubhis sounded in the sky, from Devaloka, to herald the birth of Him that is Un-born.

In the subtle realms on high, Kinnara and Gandharva sang; Siddha and Charana hymned; while Vidyadhara and Apsara danced in ecstasy at the sacred birth. The Munis of heaven and the Devas cascaded flowers down upon the world; clouds scudded into the sky and rumbled with soft thunder, in tune with the ocean waves.

Came midnight, dead of dark, and like a blazing full moon rising over the eastern sky, the Lord Mahavishnu was born from Devaki. He appeared with four arms, with his conch, mace, bow and disk in each of four hands, his eyes like luminous lotuses, the shimmering Srivatsa upon his breast dark blue as rainclouds, the Kaustubha ruby glittering crimson next to it. He wore a bright yellow robe and was as majestic as a thunderhead.

His hair lay in wild locks down to his shoulders. He wore an unearthly crown and earrings, encrusted with gemstones of untold splendour and power. He wore armlets, bracelets and a wide golden girdle. Thus did Vasudeva first behold his newborn son and gazed in awe upon this Hari who had been born his child! In his mind, with a fervent thought, Vasudeva gave ten thousand cows to the holy men of the world in joy, to mark the moment.

The Godchild lit the dungeon where he was born like a sun, his lustre blinding. Vasudeva felt himself purified to look upon the divine infant; he felt fear leave him. Vasudeva prostrated at the feet of that vision and hymned the Blue God, the Holy Infant before him.

Vidito asi Bhavaan saakshaat Purushah Prakriteh parah; Kevalaanubhavananda svarupah sarvabuddhidrik.

Sa eva svaprakrityedam srishvaagre trigunaatmakam; tadanutvam hyapravishtah pravishta iva bhaavyase...

I know who You are. You are the One God beyond Purusha and Prakriti, your nature pure consciousness and bliss, the witness of all thought and intellect. In the beginning, with your Yogamaya you created this universe, which is made of the three gunas of Prakriti. Then, you entered into it, yet always remained beyond it, for you diminished yourself in no way by that pervasion.

The Mahatattvas and their effects (such as Ahamkara), all remained separate and alone, until your grace caused them to combine into sixteen evolutes, which in turn produced the Cosmic Shell. In this, the seed of the universe was contained. Synthesised, the sixteen create the universe, but they existed before the universe came into being.

As you, Lord, now appear to be born of Devaki as a child, but existed long before she was. So, also, you are immanent in everything that the senses and the mind perceive, though they do not perceive you but only infer that you are. For you are both immanent and transcendent, at once.

You are the Soul of all things, the only true essence of Being. This birth of yours as Devaki's child is an illusion, your maya. Any man who claims existence apart from his Atman for the universe and its objects that he perceives is deluded. For every object, the very world, when it is examined closely, is found to be unreal, a mere name, an illusion. Only a fool will say that a dream is real.

The wisest say that all this creation, nurture and destruction of the universe flows from you, who are beyond the gunas of Prakriti, who are actless, and changeless. In another, this would be impossible, a contradiction. In you, the Brahman, it is the truth. For all of it is accomplished by your Shakti, your feminine Prakriti of gunas, while you are only her support, her scared ground. You remain immanent yet beyond the universe of forms.

By the power of your maya, you assume a pure white form, as Brahma, to create the universe, and a black one as Rudra to destroy it. O Omnipotent, you have been born into my home to save the world. The prophecy is that you will raze immense armies led by hosts of demons, who have incarnated themselves as kshatriya kings.

Lord, Kamsa knew of your impending birth into our clan and killed all our children who were born before you. Now when he learns that you have been born, he will arrive immediately, sword in hand, to kill you as well,' said Vasudeva with some emotion and fell silent, trembling at that last thought.

When Devaki saw God born as her son she smiled, despite her dread of Kamsa. She sang a hymn to him now:

'Rupam yatthat prahur avyakta maadhyam Brahma jyotirnirgunam nirvikaaram; Sattaamaatram nirvishesham, nireeham sa tvam saakshaad Vishnur adhyaatmadeepam…

You are truly Vishnu, Light of the Spirit, whom philosophers speak of as being the First, the unmanifest, the vast, the luminous, the one that transcends the gunas, the unchanging, pure being, immutable and without desire.

When a Dwiparardha ends and the universe returns to its causal state, when the five great elements return to the single Element, when the wheel of Kaala does not turn anymore, only you continue to exist, as always.

O Sovereign of Prakriti, of cosmic Time, from the flashing moment to the near infinity of a Dwiparardha is just a blink of your eyes. Indeed, this blink is the creation, nurture and dissolution of the cosmos! I seek sanctuary in you, who are the final Refuge, the master of all things.

Terrified of the serpent death, which hunts him constantly, the jiva flies from place to place, birth to birth, never finding rest or security anywhere. Finally, fortune fetches him, O Primordial One, to your feet, at which he falls in surrender and finds his peace. Death withdraws from him.

We live in fear of Ugrasena's ferocious son Kamsa, as in the shadow of death. Save us from him, for you are the saviour of your bhaktas. I beg you, hide this godly form of yours, which is seen usually only in deepest dhyana.

Madhusudana, do not let the violent Kamsa discover that you have been born of me. I fear for your safety. Soul of worlds, I beg you hide this unearthly form of four arms, with the sankha, chakra, gada and kamala. It is your lila that you, who contain the universe within yourself during your cosmic slumber, are now born from my body. Perhaps, it is a parody of the human condition, a divine jest.'

When she fell quiet, God said, *'Tvameva poorvasarghebhuh Prishnih svaayambhuve sati; Tadaayam Sutapaa naama Prajaapatir kalmashah…*

Chaste woman, in your last birth in the Svayambhuva Manvantara you were Prishni and the devout Vasudeva was the Prajapati Sutapa. When Brahma told you to perpetuate the species, you stilled your minds in dhyana and fixed your hearts upon Hari.

You sat in tapasya, bared to rain, wind, sun and snow, controlled your breath in pranayama and purified your minds. You ate nothing but leaves, and with all your being absorbed in a single desire, you worshipped me. Sinless one, I was pleased by the twelve thousand years of bhakti and appeared before you in this same form.

I am the prince among granters of boons, and I came to give you whatever you wanted. I said to you, "Ask me for anything and it shall be yours."

You replied, "Lord, be born as my son!"

You had experienced no conjugal or other pleasure, nor had you any children, and my maya subtly induced you to ask for this boon and not moksha, which also I would have given you for I can liberate any jiva.

I said, "So be it, I shall be born of you thrice!" and vanished before your eyes and you went home happy, to indulge in all the pleasures of the senses that you had forgone during your long tapasya. In time, I was born in that age as your son and I was Prishnigarbha.

The second time I was born to you both was when you were Kashyapa Prajapati and Aditi. This time I came as Vamana, the Dwarf. This is my third birth as your son, O Devaki, and I came in this form so you would both be certain who I am. You would not have recognised me if I came as an ordinary human baby.

I bless you both that, by thinking of me both as your son and as God the Brahman, you will evolve to ever higher spiritual states of divine love and finally become one with me.'

Having spoken thus, in a wink by his maya the Lord was an ordinary infant in Vasudeva's arms. He spoke into his earthly father's heart, telling Vasudeva to take him to the settlement of gopas at Gokula. Blindly obedient to the voice, Vasudeva set out with the baby in a basket, swaddled in a shawl.

He found the guards of the prison, where Kamsa held them, all in a stupor, asleep with their eyes wide open – again, the Lord's yogamaya. The great prison doors opened themselves, their thick chains, locks and bolts undone as if by magic – even as darkness gives way before the sun. The few people still about in the streets stood like statues, frozen in time, unconscious.

Black clouds filled the sky and erupted with thunder and lightning; there poured down a deluge. Vasudeva found himself trapped in the storm, when, suddenly, Adisesha, serpent of a thousand hoods, appeared behind him and followed him through the night, shielding father and son with hoods unfurled like some incredible umbrella.

Indra sent down torrents from the sky and the Kalindi, midnight-blue Yamuna, was in flash flood. The current seethed with whirlpools; it heaved with great and savage waves, like a sea in a gale. Vasudeva hesitated on the banks of the swollen river, afraid, for the cowherd colony was across, on the far shore. Then, all at once, the river parted and a clear dry path glimmered before the Yadava and his precious son: just as the ocean did a yuga ago, for Rama, when he crossed into Lanka.

Vasudeva crossed the Yamuna, the king serpent still following protectively, and arrived at Vraja, in the camp of the gypsy cowherds. He found them all fast asleep, in the same swoon as he had left the people of Mathura.

He stole into the settlement and found Yasodha also asleep, and her baby daughter beside her. Vasudeva set his son down beside Nanda's wife, picked up her girlchild and returned as he had come, to Devaki in her prison. The doors shut softly behind him and he set Yasodha's daughter, the Devi Maya, down beside his wife.

The iron fetters locked themselves once more round his ankles, and the cell door, too, locked itself. In Gokula, Yasodha stirred from her swoon. She only knew that she had given birth; she did not know if she had a son or a daughter."

THE DEVI

SRI SUKA SAID, "THUS, IN MATHURA, EVERYTHING WAS AS BEFORE – Vasudeva in fetters, and all the doors of the prison shut fast and bolted.

Now the little girl child began to wail beside Devaki. The prison guards awoke and word flew to Kamsa that Devaki's eighth child had been born – the news he awaited in dread. Kamsa leaped out of his bed, terror seizing him that the one who would kill him had arrived.

His hair wild, Kamsa ran straight to the prison where he held Devaki and Vasudeva. He was in such panic that he often stumbled and almost fell. His eyes on fire he burst into that chamber. Devaki hugged the baby girl tightly to her.

She cried piteously to the monstrous king, her cousin, 'Kamsa, she is a girl, spare her! All my sons were born like brilliant flames and you put out their lives, one after the other. This child is a girl, spare her for my sake. Aren't you my brother, aren't you gentle at all? Aren't you a kshatriya? Noble Kamsa, how will she harm you? Let her life be your gift to me. Oh I beg you, spare her!'

The demon snatched the infant roughly from his cousin's arms. Growling, he whirled the child round by her little legs and dashed her head savagely against the stone floor. But lo, at that moment the child vanished out of his hands. In her place, they saw the Goddess of eight arms, tremendous and fearful.

She wore unworldly raiment, jewels, garlands and perfumes. She carried a bow, a trident, a shield, a sword, a conch, a chakra, a lotus and a mace in each of her eight hands. Siddhas, Charanas, Gandharvas, Apsaras, Kinnaras and Uragas sang her praises: She, the Goddess, Vishnu's consort.

Kamsa cowered from the vast vision, thinking his death had come. Looming over the prison, the city, the world, she said to him in a terrible voice, 'Fool, what shall it profit you to kill me? The one who has come to kill you has been born and he is not here. Seek him out, if you can! Stop murdering innocent children.'

With a laugh, the Devi Yogamaya vanished from there, but she manifested herself across the Holy Land in myriad forms, as countless idols and images, which are known by numberless names.

Kamsa stood trembling before Devaki and Vasudeva. Suddenly, he ordered his guards to free Devaki and Vasudeva from their shackles. He folded his hands before them, apparently in great humility, and said, 'Devaki my precious sister, Vasudeva my brother! Oh, I am a horrible sinner. Like a rakshasa who kills his sons, I killed all your children. There is no sinner like me and I dare not think what narakas, what hells, lie in store for me.

I was pitiless, a butcher of my own kin – ah, I am like a living corpse, worse than a brahmana slaughterer. I believed the wretched asariri and it seems that not only mortals but the beings of heaven also lie. Believing the lie of the voice from heaven, I murdered seven of your children, my sister's babies! Ah, wretch that I am.

I beg you, don't grieve for your dead children, for they too have only reaped the fruit of their karma. No creature lives forever; when they are alive, karma from past births divides them. Their bodies are like earthen vessels, made and unmade, while the clay of which they are fashioned remains the same. So, too, the soul survives many bodies, their births and deaths.

One who does not realise this becomes enmeshed in samsara, endlessly. Dearest Devaki, it might seem to you that I have killed your children. In truth, they only paid for their karma and I was but the instrument – their births and their deaths were illusions.

The man who thinks "I am slain" or "I have slain", he identifies the Atman with the body and is ignorant. Yet, I beg you, forgive me for what

I have done so heartlessly. I am guilty and I repent. You are both such good souls – forgive me, oh please forgive me!'

Kamsa had tears in his eyes and he knelt before Devaki and Vasudeva and touched their feet as if to seek their forgiveness. When he set them free thus, rage faded from their hearts, and the gentle Devaki did indeed forgive her villainous cousin. She even smiled at him as he made to leave the mansion in which he had held them in chains.

Vasudeva also smiled, truly as if he was more pleased that Kamsa had repented than sad or angry that he himself and his wife had lost eight children. Vasudeva said, 'Great and fortunate King! When living beings identify their souls with their bodies they are plunged in ignorance. This ignorance makes a man differentiate between his own interest and the interests of others – there is no doubt that what you say is true.

God's will makes some beings kill other beings. Men who do not realise the unity of all things, who are victims of grief, joy, fear, rage, greed, fascination and pride, do not understand this.'

Having pacified them and freed them, Kamsa left for his palace. Came dawn and he sent for his ministers and military commanders. He told them what the lustrous and dreadful Goddess Yogamaya had said to him. His inner coterie was composed entirely of Asuras in human form. They hated the Devas and all things of grace and light, in an enmity as old as the earth herself.

They said to their king, 'Joy of the Bhojas! If the child born to kill you is alive, we must put every newborn infant in the kingdom to sword – in city and village, in the gopa camps, and wherever men live. We must make no distinction, any child born this past month must be slain.'

Some of them mocked the Devas, 'What can Indra's cowards do, who tremble at the sound of your bowstring. Whenever they faced you in battle and your arrows flew at them, all they did was flee. Others flung down their weapons and prostrated at your feet. Yet others stripped, untied their hair, and howled shamelessly like terrified children.

You spared their lives, saying they had abandoned the battle – men that laid down their arms, those whose chariots were shattered, those who quaked in fear, those whose bows were riven in their hands, and those that did not fight but carried banners, blew on conches or beat on drums. What can they do now, these craven Devas and their amsas? Where there is no danger they are heroes, great kshatriyas; where there is no enemy to face they shout out their challenges.

What can Vishnu do, who hides like a coward himself? What can Siva do, who spends his time in the burning ghats among ghosts and the dead? Indra has no prowess to speak of, and Brahma is always in tapasya.'

Then, after a brief pause, another demon confederate said, 'Yet we must never underestimate an enemy. We must crush the gods of light that have been born into the world, root them out with death! You tell us, great Kamsa, what to do, and we shall do it.'

Another Asura said, 'If a disease is neglected when it begins, it will set down its deadly roots deep in the body. Once this happens it becomes hard to cure. Even as the senses grow wild and powerful if they are not restrained early in life, an enemy should be dealt with before he grows too strong.

Vishnu is the foundation upon which the Devas base their strength and their power. He dwells wherever Sanatana Dharma is observed. Dharma is based upon the Veda, its mantras and rituals, and upon those who follow it. These men are our enemies. We must destroy the way of the Veda, its scholars and Rishis – those who perform yagnas and keep the sacred cows that make the sacrifices possible.

Vishnu's very form is these holy men, their wealth of cattle, the Vedas, their austere lives, their honesty, their mental control, their bhakti, their mercy and forbearance and, of course, their ritual sacrifices. Hari is the Lord of all the Devas; he is their very seed, even Brahma and Siva's.

He is our enemy, the mortal enemy of the race of Asuras; and those that know say that he hides deep in the hearts of holy men. The way to destroy Vishnu on earth is to crush the brahmanas and Sages of the world, to kill them!'

Thus advised, the ruthless Kamsa loosed a vicious campaign against the holy men of the earth and their eternal religion of truth, their spiritual lives. He commanded every evil being, man or monster, born into his time, to persecute and murder the Munis, who are the upholders of dharma. These demons had occult powers and could assume legion forms to carry out Kamsa's pogrom.

Kamsa committed himself irrevocably to his own perdition; he gave himself over into Yama's hands by the course he chose. For he that persecutes the good and the virtuous ruins only himself. His sin rots his longevity, his fortune, his honour and reputation, his precious virtue, his fate in the afterlife; indeed it destroys everything that might bring about the evolution of the sinner."

IN GOKULA

SRI SUKA SAID, "MEANWHILE, IN VRAJA, THE COWHERD CHIEFTAIN Nanda saw that his wife Yasodha had borne him a fine dark infant, who shone like a sliver of the full moon. The gopa bathed, ritually, put on festive clothes and sent for astrologers to tell his son's future.

Besides, he had the proper birth ceremonies performed for his uncannily enchanting infant. He performed the rites of purification, worshipped the Devas and the Pitrs and offered every possible prayer for the wellbeing of his son. So delighted was he that he gave away two hundred thousand cows to various Brahmanas and Rishis. He made a gift of seven hillocks of sesame seeds and priceless jewels.

Material objects are purified by the passage of time, the body by bathing, dirt by washing, and embodied beings by rituals. The senses are purified by austerity, rituals by yagnas, wealth by charity, the mind by calm, and the jiva by the knowledge of the Atman, the Soul.

The brahmanas, the sutas, the singers and the heralds all blessed the Holy Child. Minstrels sang; drummers beat out rapturous rhythms on various percussion instruments. All the dwellings in Vraja were swept clean; colourful flags, countless garlands, festoons of many sorts, decorated the cowherd settlement.

The herd, bulls, cows and little calves, was anointed with oil mixed with ochre turmeric paste. The sacred animals were painted in bright mineral dyes and adorned with wildflower garlands, peacock feathers, silk cloths, and golden chains were hung round their necks.

The gopa cowherds put on expensive silk tunics, coats and brilliant turbans. Wearing their most precious ornaments, they came bringing gifts for Nanda's son, for Nanda was their chieftain. The cowherd women, the gopis, turned out in finery, wore their best ornaments and lined their eyes with kohl to come to see Yasodha's dark boy.

They stained their shining faces with saffron powder mixed in water, and arrived, wide of hip and with full breasts, with fine presents in their hands for the child. The streets of Gokula were festive with groups of these women, whose ornaments at their ears, throats, hands, and all over, sparkled in the sun. Flowers hung from their tresses and as they walked; their earrings, necklaces and their breasts quivered as if in unison!

They came and stood round the holy child's cot and blessed him, saying, 'May you rule long over us!' They sprinkled auspicious turmeric water over one another in celebration. Festivity and mysterious joy seized the cowherds of Vraja and in that ecstasy they sang and danced; wildly, they sprayed milk, ghee, water and curd over each other. They rolled balls of butter and flung them at one another.

Unstintingly, Nanda gave gifts to everyone who came to see his fabulous son. He was especially generous to the musicians and singers.

Vasudeva's wife Rohini, the mother of Balarama, was in Vraja, too, celebrating the birth of Krishna, who was Vishnu come to the world as a man. From that day, Vraja where Vishnu dwelt also became the abode, the playground of Sri Lakshmi – fortune and prosperity of every sort came to the cowherds. Joy was among them like a river in spate."

Suka paused, then said, "Best of all the Kurus, one day Nanda left the care of Gokula to the other gopas and went to Mathura to pay the annual tribute to Kamsa. This he did and then retired for the day to the home he kept in the city. Vasudeva heard that Nanda was in Mathura and came to meet him.

When he saw Vasudeva, Nanda sprang up in delight, like a corpse into which life has entered again. He hugged the Yadava with great love. Vasudeva greeted the cowherd chieftain with as much affection.

When the formalities were over and they sat together comfortably, Vasudeva leaned forward and said with ill-concealed eagerness, 'O my brother, such great fortune that you now have a son! I know that at your age you had abandoned every hope of ever becoming a father. Ah, how well you look, why as if you have been reborn.

Dearest Nanda, in this life of many births, meeting a true friend is often a rare happening. As leaves or blades of grass flowing down a river remain in contact just briefly, so too do we, whom disparate currents of karma draw along inexorably – regardless of how much we might love each other.

Tell me, my friend, is the place where you live now with your people and your herds lush enough? Is there enough grass for your cows?' Vasudeva fetched a sigh and said as if in some anguish, 'O my brother, my wife Rohini and her son now live in your settlement, and you look after my son as if he were your own. A man must seek wealth only to give his children. If they are unhappy, of what avail is all the wealth in the world?'

Nanda sympathised, 'Ah Vasudeva, the evil Kamsa killed all your sons. Though your last child was a girl, he murdered her as well. Do not grieve, my brother, all your children have found heaven for themselves. Every living thing is created by unseen God; he is their support and in death they return to Him. The man who knows this never grieves.'

Vasudeva replied, and his tone was a trifle strange, 'You have paid your yearly tribute to Kamsa, and you and I have met. I beg you do not tarry in this region any longer, for we see the most evil omens over your Gokula.'

Nanda was taken aback by the conviction and fear he heard in his friend's voice. He embraced Vasudeva and, heeding the Yadava's warning, left Mathura in his oxcart the same day."

PUTANA MOKSHA

SRI SUKA SAID, "AS HE WENT ALONG IN HIS CART, NANDA THOUGHT that Vasudeva's warning was urgent and could not be idle. He, too, had seen some evil omens in Vraja. Now he prayed to Vishnu for protection.

Meanwhile, Kamsa had ordered a rakshasi called Putana, who delighted especially in murdering young children, to kill every newborn across his kingdom. She ranged through village and town, forest and cowherd camps doing her fell king's bidding.

Parikshit, the forces of darkness, devils and demons, thrive only where the sacred and potent names of the Lord Hari are not chanted. In Gokula, he was worshipped fervently everyday, for the gopas and the gopis were all bhaktas. Besides, Vishnu himself now dwelt in Avatara in Vraja!

Putana could go where she pleased, as swiftly as she liked, assuming any shape she cared to. She arrived in Gokula as a bewtichingly beautiful young woman, a form she had assumed with her powers of maya. A profusion of mallika flowers was in her rich black hair. Her waist, it seemed, was reduced to extreme slimness – by a double onslaught on it from two sides, by her full breasts and her ample hips!

She wore fine clothes; her hair fell in sweet ringlets over her fine brow, lit by the sunlight that her golden earrings reflected. Her smile was full of mysterious enchantment, and she favoured all the gopas and gopis she saw as she sauntered through Gokula with irresistible sidelong glances.

Why, Putana came as if she were the Devi Lakshmi herself, so lovely did she seem – with a lotus in her hand and come to greet the incarnate

Lord. All the gopis who saw her were fascinated. As she walked leisurely through the main street of Vraja, her black eyes fell upon the very baby she had been sent out to find and kill. She saw Krishna lying on his rope cot in his mother's yard, basking in the yard. He who had come to bring death to the Asuras born into the world lay there like fire smouldering under a layer of ashes. He sensed her clearly and knew who she was. He lay there with his eyes shut.

She stepped into Nanda's gate. Yasodha and Rohini saw her and stood transfixed by her hypnotic beauty. They did not know she was like a sword in its jewelled sheath: beautiful to behold but deadly inside.

Without a word, but crooning as if with the greatest love, Putana sat down on the ground. She picked up little Krishna, and baring her fair breast, which she had smeared with a most virulent poison, began to suckle him. Yasodha and Rohini watched helplessly, for by the demoness' power they could not move.

The dark baby, though, seized the proffered breast eagerly. He took the long and venomous nipple into his mouth and began to feed. Avidly he sucked at the rakshasi's teat, holding it firmly in his tiny, awesome grip. He fed not merely on the poison and what ooze there was in Putana's breast, he fed on her very prana, her life!

As he sucked her life out of her, she began to struggle and cried, 'Stop! Enough! Ah, let me go!'

The baby held her fast, and drank on. Putana threshed about in agony; the sweat poured from her. Her eyes turned crimson and bulged from her head. Krishna fed on, calmly, inexorably. Putana sprang to her feet, but could not prise the infant from her breast. Then, the demoness gave a shriek like a thunderclap, which shook the earth and made the stars in the sky and the under-worlds tremble. Men of faint heart fell unconscious at the cry.

That cry and Putana died with Krishna still clinging to her breast. Dying, she was no longer the ravishing beauty that had strolled into Gokula. She resumed her real form – fanged and dreadful, her hands were claws, her skin black and scaly, and her red hair wild. She was immense, her head in the sky. The rakshasi died as Vritrasura did when Indra struck him with his thunderbolt.

As she fell, she crushed everything for six krosas around Gokula, even the biggest trees. By Krishna's grace, she did not kill any cowherd. The gopas and gopis stood shivering with fright, terrified by her howl, and now by the sight and the size of her. Her fangs were like the poles of ploughs; her nostrils were like mountain caves. Her breasts were like crags; her eyes were like long-abandoned wells. Her hips were like sand dunes, her arms and legs like the embankments of a river, and her belly was like a dried lake!

The Godchild lay calmly upon the immense corpse and kicked his legs playfully. The terrified gopis snatched him up. Yasodha and Rohini waved a cow's tail over him, bathed him cow's urine, and smeared his body with dust upon which the herd had trodden.

They touched twelve parts of his body with cowdung, chanting twelve different names of Mahavishnu.*

The gopis were beside themselves and had forgotten to purify themselves, as they should, before this rite of protection. Now they performed achamana and nyasa, and then upon the child, chanting the bija mantras, which are the seeds of all sacred incantations.

They prayed thus: *'Avyadajonghri Manimaastava Jaanvathoru Yagyochyutah Katithatam Jatharam Hayaasyah...*

May the birthless One protect your feet, the jewel-throated One your knees, the One renowned for yagna, your thighs, the immutable One your hips, and the horse-headed One your belly.

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*The Padma Purana says they touched his forehead saying Keshava, his navel saying Narayana, his chest with Madhava, his throat crying Govinda, his right side chanting Vishnu, his right arm calling Madhusudana, his neck below the right ear crying Trivikrama, his left side saying Vamana, his left arm invoking Sridhara, the left side of his neck saying Hrishikesa, his back calling to Pamanabha, and his waist saying Damodara.

May Kesava watch your heart, Isa your chest, Suryanarayana your neck, Vishnu your arms, the One with the Holy Feet your face, and Ishwara your head. May Hari guard your front with his chakra. May the Lord with the mace watch your back. May Madhusudana with his bow and Ajana with his sword watch your sides!

May Urugaaya, with his conch watch over you from the four quarters, Upendra from the sky, Taarkshya from the ground, and he who bears the Halayudha from every side!

Let Hirshikesa protect your senses, Narayana your vital breath. May the Lord of Swetadwipa protect your chitta, and Yogeshwara your mind. May Prishnigarbha protect your buddhi and the supreme Bhagavan your Atman!

Let Govinda watch over you while you play and Remaapati while you sleep. Let Vaikuntha guard you whilst you are awake and Sripati wherever you sit. Let the Lord of all yagnas, the terror of the psychic forces of evil protect you while you eat.

Dakinis, rakshasis, kushmandas, who are child killers; bhutas, pretas, pisachas, yakshas, rakshasas, kotaras, vinayakas, revatis, jyeshtas, matrikas, putanas, unmadas, apasmaras and the rest that prey upon the body, upon vitality and the senses; planets, old and young spirits that appear in nightmares – may all these be as ashes in fear of the Lord's name!'

So Yasodha and the gopis anxiously chanted mantras and invoked Mahavishnu's protection for the baby, after they saw what happened with Putana. Yasodha gave the little one her breast and he fell asleep, serene as ever, feeding. Gently, she set him down on his cot.

Nanda and the other gopas, who had been out at pasture with their herd, returned and were amazed to see Putana's massive, bloated body.

Nanda murmured, 'Vasudeva has proved himself a seer, for the evil omens he saw have come true.'

The cowherds cut up the rakshasi's corpse with their axes, carried them some way from their village and cremated Putana's remains. Instead of the stench they feared would issue from the blazing carcass, there came the sweet fragrance of sandalwood! It spread everywhere like a blessing – by suckling the Avatara, Putana was freed of all her sins and she had gained moksha!

She that had murdered numberless innocent children, she the bloodsucker, the flesheater, had found deliverance from Krishna, though she had come meaning to kill him. The touch of his little feet, sacred feet, had saved her when he trod on her lap as she tried to poison him with her breast.

How glorious then would be the fate then of those who loved the Little One and cared for him as his mothers Yasodha and Rohini did! And the cows and calves, which fed him, played with him and adored him as he grew among them.

Rajan, they whose breast-milk flows from love for Krishna, those at whose breasts he feeds, shall never again be bound by samsara and its delusions. For he is the ultimate giver of boons, including the final boon of nirvana.

The gopas were startled by the redolence of the smoke that rose from Putana's pyre and returned to their homes discussing the miracle. At home, their women told them what had happened – how Putana arrived, how Krishna fed at her breast and she died, while he lay safely upon her, unperturbed.

With a cry, Nanda seized up his son and sniffed the top of his head in joy. He felt his child had been returned to him from the dead. O lord of the noble house of Kuru, whoever listens to the story of Putana moksha, a marvellous lila of the Lord's infancy, shall find a lasting love for Krishna in their hearts."

SHAKATASURA AND TRINAVARTA

RAJA PARIKSHIT SAID, "MAHATMAN, WHATEVER DIVINE GAMES SRI HARI played in any of his Incarnations are all enthralling to listen to. The story of Krishna clears dullness from the mind clouded by unfulfilled desires. He that listens to Krishna's life becomes pure of heart, a bhakta of Hari and a friend to his bhaktas.

I beg you, mighty Suka, do not stop but tell me all Krishna's exploits, the miracles that he performed as a human child."

Sri Suka said, "Three months passed after the birth of Krishna and came the day for the ceremony of his first being brought out of Nanda and Yasodha's house. All the gopi women thronged the house for the celebration. Yasodha bathed her baby ritually, while drums were beaten, holy songs sung and brahmanas chanted mantras from the Veda.

After he was bathed, the brahmanas blessed the infant Avatara. Nanda gave them a wealth of gifts: food, clothes, garlands, cows, gold and whatever they wanted. Yasodha brought Krishna out, drowsy after his bath, and laid him under a cart to sleep, shaded from the midmorning sun. Then she went to attend to her numerous guests.

She did not see the cart sprout a thousand baleful eyes; it was a demon that had come to kill the baby Avatara. The Asura, who could assume this form of a Shakata or cart, now bore down on the baby under it, to crush him to death. The heavy cart was laden with a score of heavy vessels, with milk, curd and ghee for the ceremony.

Krishna suddenly felt hungry. He wailed for Yasodha's breast. She was busy with her guests and did not hear him. The cart bore down; Krishna's hunger grew and his annoyance that his mother did not come to feed him. In anger, he kicked out with his small, petal-soft legs.

Only the young boys playing in the street saw what happened next. There was a thunderclap when Krishna's tiny foot struck the cart above him. The cart broke in pieces, flinging axle and wheel, milk, curd and butter in every direction. The gopas and gopis came running at the sound. They saw the cart inexplicably shattered, though they did not see the spirit of the dead demon that rose from it and flew into the sky.

Krishna lay there wailing for his feed. An astonished Nanda looked to the boys playing in the street for an explanation.

'It was the baby,' said they. 'He kicked the cart and smashed it.'

The cowherds dismissed this as children's fancy, for what did they know of the divine strength of Nanda and Yasodha's little boy, the Incarnation? Yet, Yasodha was afraid that the child might be possessed and fetched some brahmanas to chant the appropriate mantras to exorcise any evil spirits. When this was done, she picked Krishna up and gave him her breast.

The strongest gopas put the cart together again and the brahmanas now worshipped it. They lit a sacred fire and made offerings of curd, kusa grass, unbroken rice and water, which is the symbol of Lakshmi Devi.

Nanda Gopa thought, 'The blessings of those that are honest, free from envy, hypocrisy, vengefulness, cruelty and arrogance never go in vain.'

He asked the good brahmanas to perform an elaborate ritual for his son. They bathed the child ceremonially in holy water, sanctified with mantras from the three Vedas and mixed with rare oshadhis, medicinal herbs. They made further offerings to the agni and blessed the infant again.

Nanda fed these fine brahmanas sumptuously. He gave them generous gifts of fine cows, decked out in garlands of flowers, chains of gold and rich silks, to make his child's life a safe one. They blessed him and his son, and it is true indeed that the blessings of such men, masters of the Veda, masters of their own minds, are never proved vain."

Now Suka paused a moment, then told the story of Krishna's encounter with another fiend, when the Avatara was still a child.

"One morning Yasodha sat on the steps to her house, with Krishna on her lap, fondling him. All at once, she felt her child grow terribly heavy; it seemed to her he was heavy as a hill. She was forced to set him down on the ground. Perplexed again by the strange occurrences that attended her precious baby, she said a fervent prayer for his protection and then went into the house to see to her cooking.

Hardly had she gone, when another demon sent by Kamsa arrived on her doorstep. He was called Trinavarta and he came as a whirlwind that blinded Gokula in a swathe of flying dust. Peals of thunder resounded. Snatching the dark baby up in his potent coils of air, the Asura rose away, howling, into the sky.

For a muhurta, darkness mantled Gokula. Stones and rocks flew spinning from the demon storm. Several cowherds were injured by these and fell down, bleeding, some unconscious. Yasodha ran out in panic and found her Krishna missing. She fell on the ground and began to cry aloud, like a cow that had lost her calf. Some gopis came flying to her side and, seeing what had happened, they also beat their breasts and wept.

Meanwhile, with Krishna in his coils, Trinavarta rose high above Gokula. Then the baby began to grow even heavier. The demon felt the infant was as heavy as a mountain. The Asura could not bear his weight and tried to drop the child. Krishna held him fast round his throat with tiny hands, his grip inexorable.

Trinavarta tried to prise those little hands away, but found he could not – for the Lord does not release those whom he has once taken in hand! Krishna strangled the whirlwind demon, until the Asura's eyes fell out from his head and he plunged down to the earth from his height, dead even as he fell. Krishna fell with him, his grip as tight as ever.

Trinavarta fell squarely onto a big rock in Vraja and it is told that his monstrous body was shattered as Tripura was by Siva's astra. Pieces of flesh and blood flew everywhere; dark blood was splashed across the ground, and it flowed in a small stream. The gopis of Gokula screamed all together, cowering in fright.

When the initial shock passed, they gingerly approached the dead demon's carcass. Krishna lay quite calmly upon what remained of the Asura's chest, still clinging to the throat thick as a treetrunk. The cowherd women picked him up, and uncannily there was no injury upon the child, or a drop of the demon's blood. They came running to Yasodha with him. When she saw her son, unharmed, her face lit up and she clasped him to her, sobbing and laughing, as if she had died and her life had been returned to her.

Nanda and all his people were beside themselves with wonder and delight. They could hardly believe what had happened.

Variously, they said, '*Himsrah svapaapane vihimsitah khalah sadhuh samatvena bhayaad vimuchyate; Kim nastpashveernama Ghoshajaarchanam poorteshtadattamuta bhutasowhridam...*

Wonder of wonders! The demon tried to kill our baby, but he returned unhurt to us. The evil one probably fell and died from the weight of his sins. The good are rescued from danger by their very gentleness.

We must have done great tapasya in our past lives. We must have been bhaktas and worshipped the Lord. We must have performed many yagnas, and been kind to all living creatures. Or how could our baby, who was as good as dead, come back like this to bring us such joy?'

Though outwardly he rejoiced, Vasudeva's dire warning to him in Mathura returned to haunt Nanda Gopa. He remembered how urgently Vasudeva had begged him to leave Gokula. Still, he waited; for he did not believe that the strange events they had witnessed in Vraja after Krishna's birth – Putana and Trinavarta – were any more than coincidences, though they were extraordinary."

Suka paused again, before narrating the next notable incident in the infant Avatara's life. Then he said, "One morning, Yasodha sat with her precious child in her lap. Such love she felt for him that her breasts welled with milk and she undid her blouse and gave him one to suckle.

Sighing in his deep blue throat, Krishna drank, soon shutting his eyes in contentment. A small smile curved the corners of his mouth. Then he sighed and smiled, to say he had finished drinking. With a few drops of milk trickling down his chin, he yawned. Yasodha looked into her baby's mouth and saw the universe in it!

Kam Rodasi Syotirneekamaashah Suryenduvahnishsanaambudheemashva
Dveepaan Nagaamstadduhitrirvanaani Bhutani Yani Sthirjangmaani.

Sky, earth and the heavens she saw, the luminaries, the quarters, the sun, moon, fire, air, the oceans, continents, mountains, rivers, forests – all these and so much more the mother saw in her baby's mouth.

O King, Yasodha trembled to see the very cosmos in a wink, and unable to bear the vision, shut her eyes with a moan."

KRISHNA'S BOYHOOD

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "RAJAN, ONE DAY GARGA, MOST LEARNED AND austere Rishi and the Kulaguru to the Yadavas, came to Gokula. Vasudeva had sent him. Nanda received him delightedly, getting up when he saw him and prostrating before the brahmana, as if he were worshipping Lord himself in the person of the priest.

When he had offered Garga arghya and madhurparka, he seated him comfortably and said cordially, 'Holy One, tell me what we can do for you, who are beyond desire? When a Maharishi visits a grihasta, entangled in the cares of samsara, surely the grihasta is blessed. Your visit cannot be without some great meaning. You are he that founded the awesome science of astrology, by which men can divine matters hidden from their senses. With this jyotisha, men can penetrate the past and the future.

I beg you, great Garga, who are a Guru from your very birth, perform the rituals of purification, the jatakarma, for my two boys.'

Garga replied thoughtfully, 'I am the Kulaguru of the Yadavas. If I perform the rituals of life passage for your sons, Kamsa might think that they are Devaki's sons. Devaki's daughter warned him that his killer-to-be has been born and is alive somewhere. He knows that Vasudeva and you are friends. It would be a mistake to let him believe that Devaki's eighth child was not, after all, the daughter who flew out of his hands and revealed herself to be the Devi. If he thought your son was that child, he will come hunting him.'

Nanda thought for but a moment, before he replied, 'Let us go out of Gokula then, to some secret place, and there, I beg you, perform the naming ceremony for the boys, with the needful mantras.'

This was what Garga himself wanted and they took the two boys to a lonely spot in some woods, where the brahmana performed their initiation rites.

Garga said, 'Rohini's son shall be the ramayan, the joy, of his friends and relatives, so virtuous shall he be, so great of heart. We will call him Rama. Yet, he shall be strong beyond all measure, excessively so, baladhyikyaat. So we will name him Bala, as well. He shall be Balarama. One day, he will unite all the Yadava tribes, so let us call him Samkarshana, the attracter.

As for your second son, he has incarnated in every yuga. In the past, he has come as saviours white, red, and yellow. Now he is born as a Dark One, his colour krishnata. So let his name be Krishna. Once, this child was born as Vasudeva's son, so do the knowing call him Vaasudeva, the glorious.

Ah, countless are his names, for his deeds and his qualities – I do not know them all, why, no one does. Yet, this much I will say: he shall bring great weal among your cowherds, O Nanda, deep and mysterious welfare on every count, such as you have not dreamt of. Every obstacle in your path will melt away before him.

In olden times, O Master of Vraja, when chaos ruled the earth, which had no kings to protect the good and the peaceloving, he saved them from the bandits and brigands who terrorised them. Nanda, this child of yours is the equal of the Lord Narayana – in fame, in might and in every other way. Why, he is Vishnu himself. So look after him well, love him with all your heart.'

With this, and having secretly performed the boys' jatakarma, Garga returned to Mathura. Nanda was full of unearthly joy at what he had heard from the Sage.

As the days passed, Rama and Krishna began to crawl around not just the house but out into the streets of Vraja. They crawled through the mud, when it had rained, their golden anklets and girdles tinkling merrily. They went as far as the gate, and then feeling shy at the gaze of strangers, quickly crawled back to their mothers.

Overwhelmed by love, Yasodha and Rohini picked them up, covered as they were with golden mud, as if anointed with the rarest unguents. The women gave the two their breasts, from which they drank eagerly. Yasodha and Rohini saw the sweetest smiles on their babies' faces, showing the first teeth sprouting.

They grew apace and soon entertained their gopis with their antics. The women would leave their household chores to come out to watch the two boys clinging to the tails of young calves, who ran here and there dragging Rama and Krishna about, their delighted laughter filling the day.

So lively were their sons that Rohini and Yasodha were always anxious for them, never knowing if they should cook, clean and wash, or watch over their boys, for whose safety they feared. They were so irrepressible that they were always in danger from the hooves of cows, fires, large cats, knives, ponds, big birds and thorn bushes.

Soon, they no longer crawled but began to stand, walk and then to run about. Now there was no stopping them at all. Quickly, Krishna embarked upon all the mischief that is a legend in the world, to the delight and, later, the exasperation of the gopis of Vraja.

The story goes that, one day, the gopis gathered in the street and called Yasodha out to her door. They had come to complain about Krishna's antics.

'He unties the calves before milking time so they drink up all the milk.'

'If we scold him, he laughs in our faces.'

'He steals our butter and curd, swills all the milk in our vessels, and what he leaves he gives to the monkeys that follow him around.'

'When he is not in a mood to eat or drink, he breaks our vessels so everything goes waste.'

'When he finds the vessels empty, when we hide our butter and curd, he flies into a rage and stalks out, pinching the little babies and smaller children on his way so they cry.'

'When we hang our butter up, out of his reach, he makes himself a ladder from our mortars and footstools and gets at them anyway.'

'When he still cannot reach, he breaks a hole in the pots hung high with a stick and stands below eating and drinking whatever comes down.'

'He comes at dead of night and the glow from his body gives him light enough to see the hanging pots!'

'He comes when we are out drawing water from the river or the wells.'

'If we question him he answers us impudently and relieves himself in our yards!'

Krishna appeared behind his mother, and peeped out at the gopis.

'Look at him now, such a picture of innocence!'

'As if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth!'

They kept glancing at him, because he was utterly beautiful and they could not help themselves, and because they were amused by the expression of fear that he assumed. Yasodha only laughed away what they said; she could not possibly bring herself to scold her beloved son.

Then, another day, when Krishna was out in the yard playing with Rama and some gopa boys, some of them came running to Yasodha. 'He's eating mud again!' they cried. 'Krishna is eating mud again.'

She came out and seized him by the hand. Anxious, as ever, for his health, she dragged him to her and cried angrily, 'Wicked child! You're eating mud again.'

Again, his face seemed full of fear and he shook his head, denying it. 'Don't lie!' Yasodha scolded, 'All your friends and even your brother Rama say that you ate mud.'

'They are lying, mother!' he protested. 'If you don't believe me, look in my mouth and see if there's any mud there.'

Yasodha said, 'Show me then.'

And Hari, who had come as this child, but was always Himself, yawned his mouth open for his mother to look into. Yasodha peered in and again she saw the universe there! All the worlds and their beings that move and stood rooted, she saw. She saw the sky and the four quarters. She saw the Earth, its mountains and seas. She saw the realms of wind that are called pravaaha; she saw the zones of lightning called agni. The moon and the stars she saw, and the planets.

Yasodha saw all the heavens in her boy's mouth, with all their galaxies; she saw the Panchmahabhuta – the primeval elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether. She saw the Indriyas and the Gods that rule the great senses. The mind she saw, the elements that are the objects that the senses perceive, and the gunas, which are the essences of Prakriti.

Yasodha saw the universe in her son's mouth, all its infinite variety caused by the jiva, the individual soul, kaala, time, svabhaava, nature, and the mystifying impressions of karma through the chasmic ages, the Kalpas.

As if to crown the vision and complete her perplexity, she saw Gokula and herself in it!

Yasodha wondered in absolute awe, 'What is this? A dream? A hallucination? Have I gone mad?' Then the truth she hardly dared admit, 'Or is this because my child has uncanny powers?' In some dread, she began to pray, 'I worship the entirely Inscrutable Being by whom, from whom, and in whom the universe is founded!

Oh, creation is an impenetrable mystery, which no man has ever begun to fathom – not by his deeds, his intellect, or his words. My only support is He by whose maya I am deluded and believe: "I am Yasodha", "Nanda is my husband", "This is my son", "I own all the wealth of the Gopa chieftain", or "I am the wife of the chieftain of all the gopas and gopis and they are mine to command".'

With that moment's lucid and terrible vision, Vishnu allowed the one he had chosen to be his adoptive mother in the world a glimpse of the Truth. Then, he drew a veil across her mind and she quite forgot what she had seen, and even that she had seen anything unusual.

She also forgot her earlier annoyance that Krishna had been eating mud. Overwhelmed again by her usual ardent love for him, she gathered him in her arms and took him onto her lap, where she had sat quite suddenly on her doorstep, staggered by the moment's cosmic insight. For it was true that Yasodha thought of the One God – Hari whom those that follow the Vedic path speak of as Indra and Devas, whom the Vedantins call the Brahman, the Samkhyas the Purusha, Yogins the Atman, and his bhaktas Bhagavan – as just her very own little boy!"

King Parikshit asked, "Tell me, Swami, what great punya did Nanda and Yasodha do so the Lord himself was born to become their son? Why, Yasodha suckled Narayana and he grew in their house and they were witness to all his marvellous deeds and antics, which the greatest Sages sing about even today."

Sri Suka said, "Just before Krishna's birth into the world, Brahma told the Devas to incarnate themselves to be of service to Lord Hari. Drona, who is the leader of the Vasus of heaven, and his wife Dhaara were born as gypsy cowherds. As they were about to carry out Brahma's wish, they said to him, 'On earth, may we find the sort of bhakti that liberates jivas from the wheel of samsara and all its sorrows.'

Brahma granted them that boon, and they were born as Nanda and Yasodha. Thus, Krishna came to them as their own child, for so they believed him to be, and they adored him more than any other gopa or gopi in Gokula did. It was to keep Brahma's word to Drona the Vasu and his wife Dhaara that Krishna and Rama spent their childhood and boyhood in Vraja and brought such intimate rapture to the cowherd couple during those years."

DAMODARA

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONE MORNING, YASODHA HAD SET HER MAIDS TO CLEAN her house, wash the clothes and do the cooking, while she herself began churning milk to make curd. As she churned, she began singing softly – songs that came to her in inspiration, songs about the uncanny happenings of Krishna's childhood.

She wore a silk garment round her ample hips, fastened with a golden girdle. Her fine breasts oozed milk from the great mother's love that she felt whenever she thought or sang about her son, which was most of the time. The bracelets around her wrists and her pendulous gypsy earrings flashed in the sun, as she churned vigorously.

Beads of sweat stood on her face at her exertions; her smooth skin shone with the moisture. Her hair, which hung to her knees, shed the jasmine flowers she had braided into them. Yasodha was a picture of radiant fulfilled womanhood, as she made her curd.

A thirsty Krishna came up behind her. He put out his small hand and stopped her churning, as ever filling her with joy. Immediately, she took him onto her lap and gave him her welling breast. Pleasure washed over his face as he drank avidly, like the waves of a sea, and her adoring gaze never left his dark features, as she stroked his curled locks. Little did she know this was God Himself that she was suckling!

A smile of complete contentment played on Krishna's face, when suddenly Yasodha noticed that some milk she put on the fire had boiled over. She gave a cry, and setting Krishna down on the floor, jumped up to take the milk off. He had not finished drinking. His lips puckered up, his eyes grew red and he bit his lip in frustration. In a flash, he picked up a great stone pestle and cracked his mother's churning vessel in two, so all her curd spilt out.

Crocodile tears in his eyes, he grabbed up a pat of butter and went off to sulk in another room deep inside their home. When Yasodha had taken the milk off the hearth, she turned to find her curd all over the floor. She knew what had happened and only laughed – ah, she loved him so much, what else would she do?

Then she went to look for him, but could not find him anywhere. She came out into her yard and saw him astride an upturned stone mortar used for husking rice. He had a great pat of butter next to him, which he had stolen from some gopi's house, and was busy feeding gobs of the hard-made stuff to his friends the monkeys, who chattered at him with utmost familiarity. Every now and then, he would look around him, nervously; it seemed as if for fear that his butter theft would be discovered.

Softly, Yasodha crept up on her son from behind, a thin stick in her hand. He saw her before she reached him and leaped up and ran off as if in some terror. His mother ran after him – whom even the greatest Yogi, who has spent lifetimes in tapasya, cannot reach without finding His grace!

Her hips were heavy and she could not go as nimbly as he did. A trail of flowers, which fell from her hair, followed her as she pursued him with some determination. The child still fled from her, dodging behind this bush or that tree, or the well in the yard of the house. But he was little still, and suddenly seemed to tire. His kohl-ringed eyes streaming tears, he stopped his flight and allowed her to catch him.

She seized him roughly by the hand and upbraided him, threatened him with the stick. Then she saw his eyes had filled with tears and fright. He rubbed them and spread the black kohl she had lined them with across his face. She could not bring herself to beat him. Throwing away the stick, she decided to tie him up instead to the rice-husking mortar. She did not know Who he was.

Yasodha tried to tie him to a stone mortar – He who is neither within nor without, who has no before or after, who is yet behind and in front, and both within and beyond the universe. Why, he is the universe, which is nothing except him. Taking the Brahman, who had assumed a human form in lila, to be her son, mother Yasodha tried to fasten him to the mortar with the piece of rope she found.

The rope was two fingers shorter than she needed. She tied another piece of rope to it and it was still two fingers short. Puzzled, she attached another, longer, length of rope to the second. It was still two fingers too short for her to secure a knot. In fair frenzy by now, she dashed into her house and brought out all the rope she had, yards of it.

Some gopis gathered around Yasodha to watch what she was doing. They were surprised to see her trying to punish her son. Piece by piece she attached all the rope she had to the one with which she meant to tie Krishna to the mortar. It was still two fingers short.

The astonished women began to giggle and then, perplexed as she was, Yasodha also burst out laughing. She could hardly believe this. Of course, it was in fact like trying to tie a rope around all the galaxies. Though she laughed, Krishna saw how she was short of breath and sweating, how her hair had come undone, how confused and near panic she was. Suddenly the rope in Yasodha's hands was much longer than she needed and she now secured him easily to the mortar, continuing to feign anger at him.

The Rishis say that by allowing his mother to tie him up, Krishna symbolically showed how he always allows his bhaktas to subdue him. Yet, he is always and infinitely free – the master of all the worlds and the Gods that rule them. Indeed, not Brahma or Siva, not Sri Lakshmi who clings to him forever, could hope to find such grace from the bestower of moksha, as the gopi Yasodha did.

The God who incarnated himself as the son of that gopi is not easy for yogins who practise physical austerities or for gyanis that have passed beyond the body and become one with the Atman to attain. However, bhaktas, who worship and love the Lord Krishna – he always comes to them.

Once he allowed himself to be tied up, his mother went back into her house and began churning fresh curd. Krishna sat pensively upon the stone mortar for a while. Then he saw two lofty arjuna trees and saw that they were two divine beings, Guhyakas, cursed to be born as trees.

They were in fact the sons of Kubera, Lokapala of the northern direction and Master of the nine treasures. The two were called Nalakubara and Manigriva, and Narada had cursed them in rage, to stand as trees for many years, to curb their arrogance."

THE SALVATION OF KUBERA'S SONS

THE RAJA PARIKSHIT ASKED, "O MASTER, WHAT CRIME DID THE TWO commit that a most gentle Devarishi like Narada cursed them in anger, which is a mark of tamas?"

Sri Suka said, "Kubera's sons were haughty and they became servitors of the Lord Rudra. One day, they ranged the enchanted woodlands around Mount Kailasa, on the banks of the Ganga, in a place vivid with flowers of every hue and scent. They were very drunk and had a knot of women with them, as merry as themselves, as intoxicated. They had hunted and brought along the flesh of several animals to cook over a spit and eat.

Like bull elephants with their cows, the two magnificent Guhyakas entered the Ganaga, laden with lotuses, and they sang and they played and made love, all together. O Kaurava, the Devarishi Narada chanced to pass along the banks of the river in that very place. He saw the orgiastic group at their lavish sport in the water.

When the women saw Narada, they rushed out of the Ganga and quickly clothed themselves – out of respect, as well as fear that he might curse them. Kubera's sons, however, were so drunk that they did not bother to cover their nakedness and continued to sing their rather lusty song.

Narada saw how their heads were turned with drink and also, certainly, the arrogance of who they were – the sons of the Lord of wealth himself. The Devarishi saw, too, their innate virtue, like fire slumbering beneath ashes, and he was moved by pity and a desire to help them find their truer selves.

Narada cursed Nalakubara and Manigriva, but he did not curse them in outrage or fury, but rather in mercy, to help them. In his curse a blessing hid.

Narada said to himself, 'For the man steeped in pleasure nothing harms him as wealth does. Not even the arrogance of his birth, which stems from the rajoguna, corrupts him as wealth does. With the advent of wealth, inevitably, vices and perversions follow in train – gambling and drink, and sexual deviations.

Men made blind by wealth forget their bodies are mortal and slay countless living creatures to feed their endless greed. Often, the human body is referred to as 'deva' – as Naradeva or Bhudeva. Yet, in the end this 'god' becomes part of a worm, ashes or dust. Do these vain men, who slaughter their fellow creatures, realise that when they die they are destined for the most terrible hells?

To whom does this body belong? To the one that feeds it, the mother and father who bring it into being, to the master that buys its services, to the fire that consumes it finally, or to the dogs that gnaw its bones after the fire has done its work?

Is he a man of any wisdom, who identifies himself with this worthless, transient body? It comes from the pristine elements and returns all too soon to them. Who but a fool will torment his fellow beings to serve this fleeting insubstantial thing and its endless lusts?

There is only one cure for the rich man's blindness of spirit born from his pride in his wealth – poverty. A poor man feels compassion for other poor men and their suffering. His heart is not made of stone as the rich man's is. He that has felt his skin being torn by a thorn will not wish the same pain on anyone else.

He that suffers himself finds compassion within himself. The man who has never been pricked by a thorn does not understand the pain of someone who is. The poor man, who is without ego, who endures all the pain that fate brings him, is like a Sannyasi. He is austere by necessity.

He that is weakened by constant hunger will naturally turn his face away from any savagery. Rishis with serene minds come unbidden to the homes of the poor. By meeting with these Sages, the poor man begins to understand the meaning and the true purpose of his existence. Quickly, his mind becomes pure.

The sadhu, who has sought refuge at the Lord's feet, who is calm, has little use for the company of the rich and arrogant man, whose spirit is full of evil, whose friends and deeds are vile. What will a holy one do except shun such a man, as he deserves?

These Guhyakas are full of the pride born of ignorance. They are steeped in wine, women and song. They are confident that no harm can befall them because they are wealthy. They give unbridled rein to every wantonness. I mean to show them some correction.

They are the sons of Kubera, a Lokapala; yet, avidya's darkness has made them arrogant and perverse.' He almost smiled, 'Just look at them! They are so drunk that they hardly know that they have not a stitch upon themselves, while I am here watching them. I know what I shall do. I will turn them into trees and they shall stand naked as they are, and remember their past life and who they were.

Yes, for a hundred years let them stand as trees and then they will encounter the Lord Vishnu. The curse will end and they will be splendid Guhyakas again – but they will have left their pride behind them and become great bhaktas.'

Narada cursed them to be born in the region known as Vraja, and he went on to Narayanasrama, where he was heading when he saw the two. Instantly, Nalakubara and Manigriva became two arjuna trees in Vraja where Lord Hari would be a child one day.

For a hundred years they stood, unable to move while the sun scalded them, the wind swayed them and the rain lashed their trunks and branches. In time, vanity left them and their minds turned to God for succour. They grew calm and stood meditating upon the resplendent Vishnu.

A hundred years later, secured to the stone mortar by his mother, Krishna saw the spirits of the Guhyakas in the mighty and aged trees. He knew what he must do. Effortlessly dragging the massive mortar along, as if it were a feather, he approached the trees.

As he went, he thought, at least with the part of himself that was not just a playful child but God, 'Narada is precious to me and these two are the sons of Kubera, who is my bhakta. I must fulfil the Devarishi's promise to them that they shall find redemption from me.'

As time passed, the trees had grown huge and very little space now separated their massive trunks. The Godchild in him curious to see the trees were actually spirits, Krishna went towards the arjunas. He walked through them and the mortar became wedged between the two.

Krishna found he was stuck, the rope held him fast to the heavy mortar. Annoyed, he pulled at it sharply. The trees shook, branch and leaf, and then with a crack like thunder, thick trunks snapping like twigs, they came crashing down around little Krishna. As if they were fire latent in wood, the two Guhyakas rose from the felled trees, and, lighting up Gokula with their splendour, they came to the Avatara.

Bowing low to him, their old hubris a thing of the past, Nalakubaara and Manigriva folded their hands in complete humility and reverence and said:

'Krishna Krishna Mahayogimsthvamaadhyah Purushah Parah; Vyaktaavyaktamidam Vishwam Rupam Te Brahmana Viduh...

Krishna, Krishna, Greatest Yogin, who are the primal Cause! You are the origin of the manifest universe and the unmanifest one, too. Your body is this cosmos, material and spiritual. Those that know the Brahman experience it as being so.

You, without a second, are the body, the vital airs, the ego and the senses of every living creature. You are the pervasive Vishnu, who is Time, the eternal One, and the final sovereign.

You are subtle Prakriti, of the three gunas; you are its results like Mahatattva, the ubiquitous Purusha, and the everpresent Witness of the motions of Prakriti. You cannot be fathomed by any of the faculties of nature – the mind, the ego, the intellect, the senses, and the rest—for you are their source. The created cannot plumb the Creator, who is the only true Subject.

Not the jiva can see you, because you are before the jiva was, which is enveloped in ignorance, imprisoned by a mind, a body, by karma. How can a limited being know You, who are infinite?

We salute you, Vaasudeva, who own every divine glory, who are the Maker, the Brahman, whose splendour is masked by the gunas, whose origin you are: as the clouds, which come from the sun, hide his radiant face.

Many times, you incarnate yourself in the world. Yet you remain the perfect Spirit, unbound by the body you assume. Your Avataras are distinguished by superhuman, supernatural powers, which are quite unequalled and apparently impossible for any of the embodied to possess.

O you are the Supreme One, Lord of blessings, who have manifested here in an amsa bhaga to deliver the world from evil. We salute you, who are absolutely good, who are goodness itself! We salute you, who are entirely auspicious! We salute Vaasudeva, who is completely peaceful, and the lord of the Yadus!

Lord, bless us, we are the servants of your bhakta Narada Muni. For it was he that saved us from our vanity with his curse to be born as trees and wait for your incarnation. Ah, he did not curse us, but blessed us that we now see you before our eyes!

May whatever we say from this time only be in praise of you. May whatever we hear from this time only be legends of your fathomless deeds. May whatever our hands do be your work. May our minds forever rest at your lotus feet, remembering them. May our heads always remain bowed before your home, which is everywhere, the universe. May our eyes always behold your bhaktas, who are in truth, you.'

When the Guhyakas eulogised him so, Krishna, the little Lord of Gokula, still bound by his waist to the stone mortar, spoke to them, smiling. 'I know how you were once vain, O sons of Kubera, and how Narada Muni purified you with his curse. As the sun does darkness, the very sight of holy Rishis, whose minds are full of peace, frees other men from the bondage of samsara. It removes their blindness of spirit and enables them to see the truth.

Nalakubaara, both of you can now return to your home, and you will live lives surrendered to me. What you want, bhakti and love for me, which fetch moksha, have already germinated in your hearts.'

With their palms folded in worship, the two walked round the Godchild many times in pradakshina. They flew up into the air and vanished towards the northern direction where their father Kubera rules, leaving Krishna still tied to the mortar."

LEAVING GOKULA: THE SLAYING OF VATSA AND BAKA

SRI SUKA SAID, "WHEN THEY HEARD THE CRASH OF SOUND, NANDA AND the other gopas came running to the place, thinking it was a thunderbolt. They saw the two arjuna trees had fallen, and from no apparent cause.

Then they saw Krishna dragging his mortar along, by the rope tied to his belly, and amazement and fear gripped them. They spoke in hushed voices.

'What rakshasa did this? Surely, this is an omen of some dreadful evil to come.'

'Some terrible danger stalks us.'

Some young boys, who had been playing nearby and had seen what happened, now said, 'Krishna dragged that mortar between the trees and pulled them down!'

'We saw two spirits rise out of the trees and fly away into the sky!'

Most of the cowherds were sceptical about the child having dragged the trees down. Some, though, wondered if the boys' story did not contain some truth, after all the strange and marvellous happenings in Gokula after Krishna's birth. Nanda looked at his son tied to the mortar by his waist, and laughing, he freed him. Such irony in that – freeing the one that finally frees every soul!

Krishna remained as merry as ever, and he was always the apple of the gopis' eyes. Irresistibly, they were drawn to him, as if they could hardly bear to be away, as if they could not help themselves.

The Lord, who is the source of every divine majesty, came among these women as a child. He sang aloud for them when they asked him to, as if he was simple-minded; he danced at their whim, like a puppet!

They would order him about, as they pleased: 'Krishna fetch me that stool', 'Krishna, bring me that measure', or 'Krishna, get me those sandals'. He would do whatever they asked, joyfully, and if he found what they wanted from him was too heavy he would fling it down, grimace and throw up his hands. The gopis laughed then; they fondled and kissed him.

The knowing say that the Lord is always ready to please his bhaktas, to be as their servant even! This was his lesson for the wise and his pranks and his games were the endless delight of the gypsy cowherders of Vraja.

Once, a fruit-seller came calling out her wares. Krishna, who bestows the fruit of karma, came rushing out of his house, his little hands full of rice grains to exchange for fruit. As she filled his palms with what she had, the rice leaked away and fell on the ground.

Jokingly, she asked then, 'What about my price for the fruit?' He looked in the direction of her basket and she gasped to see that it had filled with priceless gemstones.

One day Rama and Krishna went to the banks of the midnight-blue Kalindi to play with their friends. After a while, Rohini went to look for them. She found them soon enough and called them to come home. They were so busy playing they ignored her; she was soft-hearted and would never scold them no matter what. She called a few times, then went back and sent Yasodha, who could be much sterner, to fetch them.

Yasodha arrived on the spot and the very sight of her son filled her with such love that her breasts filled with milk. She called out in absolute adoration, even as the soul might to God, 'Krishna, my darling, come and let me feed you. You have played enough. You must be tired and hungry, my child.

Sweet Rama, be a good boy and come home with your brother. You ate so many hours ago in the morning. It's late for lunch, Rama, come home now. Your father Nanda is waiting for you both, before he eats. And you boys, your mothers must be waiting for you, go home now.

Come home, Krishna, you must bathe. Have you forgotten it is your birthday today? You must clean yourself before you make a gift of cows to the brahmanas who have already arrived. Look at your friends, their mothers have bathed them all and made them wear their best clothes and ornaments.

Come, my Krishna, after your bath and the ceremony you can come back to play as much as you like.'

Tied to that transcendent One by a mother's love, she took her little boy by his hand and brought him home, and Balarama, too. There the two mothers bathed, clothed and adorned their sons, and fed them."

Suka paused, before continuing, "By now, Nanda and the other gopa elders were alarmed by the train of uncanny events after Krishna's birth in Gokula. They were anxious that further calamity was in store for them. They held a conclave to consider what they should do.

At this meeting, Upananda, an elder who was particularly fond of, and concerned about, young Krishna and Rama spoke. He was a wise one, quick and adept at understanding any situation, a master of time and place, as it were.

This is what Upananda said, 'If we want to protect Krishna, I am certain that we must leave Gokula and move somewhere where we shall be safe. Only God's grace saved him from the rakshasi, and Shakatasura. He was blown into a realm where only birds go by Trinavarta, and fell from the sky with the demon. Again, only providence saved his life.

Then the two arjuna trees fell around him as if struck by thunder, and yet again his life was miraculously spared by the Lord's intervention, what else? We would be fools to ignore so many omens and warnings and to tempt fate. The next time, Krishna might not escape with his life and I feel terribly certain that more danger threatens imminently.

Before something dreadful happens, we must leave this place with our families and our herd, and find another place in which to live.'

He paused to let the import of what he was saying sink in, then continued slowly, 'Have you heard of Vrindavana, the virgin forest on the banks of the Ganga? It is fringed by the lushest pastures to be found anywhere. It has sacred hills, ancient and wonderful trees and plants with magical scents, vapours and flowers. My heart calls me there urgently. I say we should load our carts and move at once, today!'

The rest of the cowherds immediately agreed. Word flew forth through Gokula, and men, women and children began to load their carts with their possessions. In a few hours, they were ready, and taking their herd with them, set out on the journey towards distant Vrindavana.

The older gopas and gopis and the smaller children rode in the carts, the herd went ahead of them, and the gopa men followed the caravan, with their brahmanas, and their bows in their hands. The sound of their drums, horns and conches echoed around them in every direction.

The women wore fine new clothes, as is auspicious when embarking towards a new life. They had smeared their ample breasts with fresh saffron powder. Golden and jewelled necklaces glittered at their throats, and they swayed with the movement of the trundling carts. They sang in the sweetest, gayest voices as they went along, and many of the songs were very recent – songs about little Krishna and Balarama.

Yasodha rode in front with Krishna, Rohini and Balarama, in Nanda, the gopa chieftain's, cart, and they smiled to hear the other women behind them singing in chorus about their sons. Travelling by day, making camp around guardian fires by night, they crossed eight forests before arriving on the edge of the most verdant, most beautiful and untouched one of all – Vrindavana on the banks of the Yamuna.

They decided they would live on the hem of the forest, and began by arranging their carts in a wide crescent. Rama and Krishna were in transport to be in the wild place. They saw Mount Govardhana looming behind the great jungle; they saw the white sand dunes on the riverside, like hillocks of crushed diamonds; and their hearts were full.

In Gokula, the two amsavataras had been mischievous, full of every kind of prank. As they grew a little bigger in Vrindavana, they began to mind the calves of the herd. With their friends, the other little gopa boys, they would take the young animals out to pasture near the river. They took toys with them and spent all the day at games.

They played on little reed flutes, and sang; they shot stones far across the wide river from their slingshots; they played with wooden balls they made, to which they tied little bells. The made masks of bulls' heads and had mock fights, rushing at one another with loud bellows, like fighting bulls. They mimicked the calls and cries of every animal of the forest: leopard and elephant, tiger, jackal and gibbering monkey.

The forest became their enchanted garden; and with Balarama and Krishna near them, Vrindavana was truly like heaven on earth for the gopa boys. One day, another demon, Vatasura, sent by the disturbed forces of evil, came to kill Krishna. He assumed the form of a calf and mingled with the herd. The real calves sensed him clearly and were terrified.

In a moment, Krishna saw what he really was. He pointed the Asura out just to Rama, so the other boys would not be frightened. Casually, he sauntered through the herd towards the monster in disguise, just as Vatasura hoped.

However, suddenly, the seemingly vulnerable little boy was transformed into an elemental force: in a flash, with untold strength, he seized the devil by his hind legs and tail. At once, the fiend stood revealed in his real, hideous, form. Krishna coolly swung him round and flung him high into the air, a hundred hands or more. The asura landed on top of a kapittha tree and then fell to the ground, a slimy scaled carcass, bringing down a shower of kapittha fruit around him.

The other little gopa boys stood stunned. Recovering in a moment, they cheered loudly, and sang and danced round Krishna and the demon's corpse. Above, the sky opened and the Devas poured down a rain of flowers from their worlds beyond the bland azure."

Suka began another story, of yet another demon that attacked Krishna. "It became a regular feature for Rama and Krishna to take the calves out to pasture, with their little friends. They would set out early in the morning, carrying their lunch in parcels their doting mothers packed for them, and stay out all the living day.

One morning, they wandered farther than usual, and the herd grew thirsty, as did they. They saw a fine lake shimmering ahead of them and brought their animals to it. The calves drank their fill, and the gopa boys did as well. Suddenly they heard the most sinister sound as of some great serpent hissing.

Looking up, they saw an Asura big as a hill had stalked them and now loomed menacingly over boys and calves. They did not know it, but this was the demon Baka, who had come as an enormous crane. His crimson eyes ignored all the calves and the other boys and fixed themselves just on Krishna.

With the weirdest, ululating cry, Baka charged the young Avatara, and opening a bill long as trees, and wide as caves, swallowed Krishna in a flash. He did this so swiftly that Rama and the other boys stood rooted in shock. They were, truly, like the senses when prana has departed, more dead than alive.

However, Bakasura felt he had swallowed a ball of fire, that is how Krishna burned his throat. Screaming, the fiend vomited the one that is even Brahma's lord onto the ground. He saw Krishna was quite unharmed, and red eyes glittering with hate, rushed at him with his beak sharper than swords.

The Devas watched, with bated breath, from the sky. On Earth, the gopa boys watched in utter terror, certain that the giant bird would kill their Krishna. They did not know that the demon was a secret friend and ally of Kamsa, king in Mathura. Krishna himself, however, was entirely serene, as he stood his ground and seized Bakasura squarely by the bill.

One segment in each hand, he ripped the face of the evil crane in two. He tore its throat out, and its body, so its black blood sprayed onto the lotus pads upon the lake and all over the grass on its shore. Blind and dying, Baka danced a few ungainly steps, then fell with a splash and a thud, half of him in the lake and half upon the ground. Krishna slew him as easily as he would split a blade of grass.

Now the Devas poured down a storm of the sweetest jasmine flowers that they gathered from the Nandanam, Indra's celestial garden in Amravati. They sang the praises of the Avatara and Apsaras appeared on high and danced on air, while Gandharva minstrels played on unearthly instruments and sang in voices out of dreams.

The gopa boys saw all this and hardly believed their eyes. They thronged around Krishna and clung to him, even as the senses do to prana when it returns. Soon, they went back to their homes with the herd and told their parents and elders what had happened in the forest. The gopas and gopis gazed at Krishna, their hearts full of such intense, unaccountable love. Yet again, they felt that he had died and been restored to them.

They said, 'Oh, this child has faced death so many times already!'

'Each time, death took the one that came to kill our Krishna.'

'It must be the weight of their past karma, their sins, otherwise how could Krishna escape?'

'He surely could not kill such monsters himself.'

'They were all horrible and powerful, and they died like moths in a flame.'

Another gopa murmured, 'Nothing that a Brahmagyani says ever proves false. Whatever Garga predicted has come to pass.'

Almost helplessly, Nanda and his cowherds began to list all the strange and wild adventures of Krishna's young life. As they recounted these, as if in a trance, they felt the world around them recede and were subsumed into a wonderful dream, a great peace and truth.

Thus, the two divine boys spent their early boyhood in Vrindavana, playing all the day. They played hide-and-seek or built sand edifices upon the white banks of the Yamuna, chased each other and their little friends like monkeys – perfectly happy every moment."

THE LIBERATION OF AGHASURA

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONE EVENING, KRISHNA DECIDED HE WOULD NOT GO home for lunch the next day but eat in the forest. He awoke early that morning and blew loudly on his horn to summon his friends. They came quickly, carrying their lunch in bundles, and the company of young gopas set out for the forest, herding the calves before them.

The troop carried an assortment of items with which to amuse themselves – slingshots, sticks, horns and flutes. They brought earthen pots full of curd-rice, and with at least a thousand young bulls and cows, marched towards Vrindavana. Of course, being Nanda's sons, Krishna and Rama had the most calves, but they took all the young animals along, their friends' and their own, as a single herd.

Their mothers had put kaacha, red beads, precious gems, and golden ornaments on them. They adorned one another further with fruit, new leaves, flower-laden twigs, buds, peacock feathers, and coloured their faces and bodies with bright mineral powders. In high spirits, they playfully snatched or stole each others' catapults, and when the owner came running for his slingshot, it would be flung high and far to another boy.

When, finally, the boy that owned the catapult grew peeved, the others would laugh and give him back his weapon. At times, Krishna would wander away as if in a trance towards some particularly dense thicket – perhaps he saw hidden woodland spirits there that his friends did not – and then the others would be after him, competing to be the first to reach him and touch him. He was irresistible to them.

They played beautifully on their flutes, blew loud, clear notes on their horns. Some made buzzing sounds with lips pursed, to mimic the honey beetles of spring feasting on newly opened flowers. Others sang like the koyals in the trees, mellifluously.

They would chase the shadows on the ground of birds flying above as if to catch them, then shriek with laughter. They would walk as swans swim, regally and gracefully. Utterly gifted, they would imitate the one-legged stance of the cranes on the river or run up to peacocks that had their fans unfurled, and dance with them.

All the forest creatures were their friends, because Krishna's grace was upon them. The gopa boys would tug at the long tails of the langurs perched on low branches and the creatures would allow the littlest boys to even swing by these. Other boys would scramble into the trees after the monkeys, which then led them on merry chases through the branches.

Some of the boys jumped into the river and chased frogs that croaked at them to the far bank. Some spoke long and earnestly to their reflections in the water. Some little gopas ran into caves and spoke to the echoes of their own voices.

And so they played all day – the gopa boys and He that appears as the bliss of the Brahman to gyanis, as their Ishta Devata to bhaktas, and as a human child to those caught in the tangles of maya. And how can anyone describe the fortune of the people of Vraja, before whose very eyes He stood, day after day, the dust from whose feet is unavailable to yogins that spend life after life worshipping him, with their senses controlled and their minds indrawn?

That day, another Asura called Agha, whose very name meant that he was sin incarnate, appeared on the fringes of Vrindavana. The Devas had drunk the amrita of immortality; yet even they feared this demon, so evil and powerful was he. Agha, also, had been sent by Kamsa; he was the brother of Baka and Putana, whom Krishna killed.

His heart malignant, Agha came to take revenge on the Avatara and his little friends. For a while he stood hidden behind some trees and his eyes burned with untold rage and hatred. He could not bear to watch the enraptured games the gopa boys played.

Aghasura thought, 'This is the boy that killed my brother and my sister. I will offer his life and his brother's to my dead siblings, so they find peace. If I kill these two, the rest of the cowherds shall be as good as dead, for these are like prana to their clan. Once the lifebreath leaves a body, one need no more concern oneself with any threat from it.'

Slowly, still hiding, Aghasura used his occult powers to transform himself – he slowly changed into a gigantic python. So great were his powers, so monstrous was he, that the serpent he became was a yojana long and big as a hill. In cold silence, he lay still upon the jungle floor and yawned open his maw. He lay in wait, his lower jaw upon the jungle floor, the upper one touching the clouds in the sky.

The sides of his mouth were like immense caverns and his fangs were like mountain peaks. Leading into his jaws, a forking path, lay his tongue. His breath was a keening wind; his eyes shone like baleful flames in a forest fire. So unbelievably huge was the monstrous python that when the gopa boys first saw him, they thought he was another natural marvel of some sort, of Vrindavana. A few remarked that this portion of the forest resembled a great constrictor, with his jaws agape, and wondered at the likeness.

Children that they were, and innocent, they allowed themselves to be carried away upon what they imagined was a fine fantasy. One gopa boy cried, 'Look! Is this a living creature? It seems to breathe.'

'I cannot tell if it is part of the mountainside or a python lying in wait to swallow us!'

'Look at that cloud, pink in the sun – it could be the roof of a serpent's mouth.'

'And this part on the ground could be the other jaw.'

'These caves to the left and right seem like the corners of an immense snake's mouth.'

'These two curving peaks might be fangs!'

'This path its tongue and the pitch blackness between the peaks its mouth and throat.'

'The hot wind is its breath and the stink of flesh is from the creatures it has devoured rotting in its belly.'

'If we walk along the path of its tongue, into its mouth, will it swallow us?'

'And if he does, won't he meet the same fate as Baka did?'

They looked at the perfect face of the slayer of Baka and burst into peals of clear, innocent laughter, clapping their hands in a storm. Krishna heard all this in silence,.with a smile on his face. However, unlike his little friends, who thought they were indulging a harmless fancy, the Avatara, who dwells in every heart, knew the python was real, as was the threat from Agha.

He walked a small way behind them, though, and before he could stop them, they decided to pursue what they thought was an imaginary adventure. With the herd of calves, all the gopa boys ran straight into the yawning maw of Aghasura. The enormous jaws did not clamp shut; the python kept them open for Krishna to enter – he mean to avenge his brother and sister.

For a moment, Krishna stood as if thunderstruck. He was his little friends' only protector and it seemed they had slipped through his hands and walked into the jaws of death. For just a moment Krishna paused to think, still giving the monster no clue that he knew the python was real.

Deciding how he would save the boys and kill the serpent, at once, the Dark One also walked into the gaping jaws. The Devas above, watching, gasped in anxiety; many of them cried out in dismay and warning. Throughout the world, demons, evil ones, allies of Kamsa, felt a current of hope run through them, as if their greatest objective was about to be fulfilled.

Krishna stepped blithely after his friends, and in the demon's throat, he, the deathless one, began to grow! Aghasura found himself choking, Krishna filled his neck and he could not breathe. Meanwhile, when they found the imaginary python was real, the other gopa boys all fainted with fright, as did their calves.

The great serpent began to thresh about violently, flattening large patches of the jungle around. His evil eyes bulged from his flat head, he tried frantically to swallow Krishna, down into his belly. The Avatara was a stone in his throat. Those powerful gusts of air, Agha's breath, finally burst out through the back of the monstrous snake's head, blowing it to shreds, spraying his blood and flesh for yojanas around.

When he had subsided and was still, Krishna, the final Self, revived his friends and the calves with just a look and walked out of dead Aghasura's jaws with them. Next moment, a vast serpent form of light issued from Agha's carcass and rose into the sky above Vrindavana. It lit up the corners of the firmament. For a long moment, it hung above the forest, then, like a streak of lightning, it flashed down straight into Krishna and was absorbed into him! The gopa boys below and the Devas above watched in awe.

Yet again, the Gods in the sky poured down a rain of flowers upon the blue Saviour. Apsaras danced on high, to the ecstatic songs of Gandharva musicians. The air resounded with the voices of Devarishis hymning Krishna's deed and cries of 'Jaya!'

In Satyaloka, loftiest of all worlds, Brahma heard the celebration of the immortals, and flew down on his white Swan to see what caused them to be so festive. When he saw that Krishna had killed Aghasura, who had been the bane of the world, and even the Devas, for an age, he, too, was awed.

In days to come, its jaws still yawned wide, almost as if he smiled in death – for indeed the Avatara had not only killed him, but given him moksha – Agha's dried mouth became a cave in which Krishna and his friends came to play. That day, when they came home, the gopa boys were beside themselves to tell their astonishing story to their elders, but somehow they found they that did not. They spoke about the slaying of Aghasura only after one year. Of course, their elders were astounded.

The wise know that it is hardly surprising that Agha, most dangerous of demons, found moksha when Krishna slew him. He was freed of all his sins and attained union with God. This could never have occurred unless Vishnu, creator and master of all the worlds, had been born as a human child in Vraja. Even Yogis who once see Krishna in their dhyana, their imagination, find the Divine condition. The perfect and blissful Lord himself walked into Aghasura's mouth, physically, and killed him. What surprise is there, then, that the demon found salvation?" said Suka,' Suta Ugrasravas says.

The Suta continues, 'The Raja Parikshit, whose very life was Krishna's gift to the Pandavas, now asked in deep calm, "Most erudite Muni, how is it that when you tell me these tales of Krishna they seem to dance before my eyes, as if they happened just yesterday? How is it that Krishna's little friends told their parents and elders about the slaying of Agha only a year after the event? Greatest Master, I am bewildered and feel that this was certainly the Lord's maya, and nothing else."

The king sighed in some rapture, "Ah, I am just a kshatriya. Yet I am the most blessed of men that I can listen, over and over, to the many incarnations and deeds of the Lord from you, O most worshipful Suka."'

The Suta says, 'When Parikshit said this, Vyasa's great son Suka shut his eyes and plunged deep into himself. He lost count of his senses and his very mind, and became absorbed in God, in samadhi. O best of bhaktas, it was with some effort that he returned to the everyday world, to answer Parikshit's question.'

BRAHMA TESTS KRISHNA

EMERGING FROM HIS TRANCE, SRI SUKA SAID, "O MOST FORTUNATE and best among Bhagavatas, such an excellent question you ask! Indeed, the Lord's deeds seem fresh to the mind and the heart, even after one hears them a thousand times. Wise men believe that the very purpose of our senses of speech and hearing, and our faculty of thought, is to dedicate their use to Him.

Such men are always eager to listen to legends of Hari; it becomes their very nature, part of their instinctive desires. Their keenness never wanes, rather like the avidity of coarse men to hear lewd stories about women! Listen carefully, with faith, O Rajan, for I am going to reveal a great secret to you. For to such a precious sishya, his Guru will impart even the most hermetic lore.

When Krishna saved his little friends and their herd from Aghasura, he brought them to the banks of the midnight-blue Yamuna. Gazing across the spaces of the emerald jungle, and the sparkling white sands of the riverbank, Krishna said, 'Just look at how beautiful this place is, my friends! White sand like crushed diamonds, so soft for us to play on, the river like a flowing bed of flowers, swarming with birds and bees: their songs mingling with the murmuring song of the water.'

He sighed in his blue throat, a sigh of perfect contentment, then said, 'It's late and we are hungry. Let's sit here and eat now, and let the calves graze and drink.'

The boys led their herd to drink their fill, then left them to graze the lush forest grass. Now they came and sat round Krishna like petals around a great blue pistil. They fetched their food out from the sling bags they carried and sat down to eat – in complete thrall of him in their midst.

Their eyes never left his face for long, as they ate out of natural plates, which were great flowers, or lotus petals, green leaves, bowls of fruit rind, bits of bark and flat stones. A few also used the earthen platters their mothers had packed for them. The Lord and his little friends lunched upon the pale sand, making jokes under the noonday sun, laughing uncontrollably as only children can, and remarking on how tasty their mothers' cooking was.

Imagine that sight – of Him, who is the mystery of mysteries, to whom all the offerings at every yagna are made, eating with the gopa boys, his friends. He sat enjoying himself as much as the others. His flute was tucked into his waist, his horn slung round his left shoulder and his wooden staff in his left hand, and he ate rice-and-curry balls with his right. The Devas gazed down from their heavens in wonder at the sight; they craned their unearthly ears to hear the jokes the Avatara cracked that made his companions laugh so much.

As the gopa boys ate, absorbed in Krishna, the calves wandered away, cropping grass as they went, deeper into the jungle. The little calf-herds did not notice, so rapt were they in their blue leader.

All at once, one of the gopas noticed the calves were missing. The boys jumped up, anxious. Krishna, who takes away every fear, said, 'You finish eating. I will bring them back.'

In a flash, he was off after the missing herd, with a ball of rice he had been about to eat still in his hand. High and low he searched, in great thickets, in deep caves, on tangled hill slopes; the herd of young animals seemed to have vanished without trace.

Brahma, Lotus-born Creator, had watched the lila of Aghasura moksha from the sky, in some wonder. He wanted to test the powers of the Avatara a little more, to ascertain if this was indeed Vishnu Himself who had been born as a human child. Brahma had spirited away the herd of calves.

After searching Vrindavana for a while, in vain, Krishna returned to the river, where he had left his friends. They had vanished too. He turned back to the forest, now seeking the herd and his companions as well. He did not find them. Then he saw with mystic vision that Brahma had taken both the boys and the calves.

Krishna knew there was just one way by which he could keep the cows and the gopi mothers' hearts from breaking. In a wink, the Avatara assumed the forms of every boy and calf that had gone missing. For him, who had created all the worlds and everything in them, this was no great miracle.

He became not merely the calves and the boys, exactly, but their staffs, their cowhorns, flutes, earthen vessels, slingshots, their shoulder bags, their clothes and ornaments, their toys. Of course, he assumed every trait of each boy and little beast – of character, quality, name, in every physical particular, and age. All this he became in a flash, for indeed, all that is, is Vishnu!

As Krishna, the gopa boys, the calves, and everything they had set out with, he who is the soul of all things returned to the cowherd camp. As each different boy, he went to each one's home and family. As each calf, he found each one's cow mother. Each boy brought home his own herd. They arrived, playing merrily on their flutes. Their mothers received them with hugs and kisses; in ecstasy, they suckled the Parabrahman who had come home as their sons.

Krishna, as many gopa boys, felt himself bathed, rubbed with fragrant oils, perfumed, clothed in fine silks, adorned with jewellery, marked with sacred saffron and sandalwood paste, fed sumptuously and fondled by all the different gopi mothers. As their sons, he regaled them with his charm, then, after a few hours, went to bed.

The cows that came home from pasture with the gopa men ran to the cowsheds and lowed to their calves. The young ones came running to their mothers, who licked them all over, then suckled them on the milk that came dripping from their teats in love. Not for a moment, and not any more than the human gopi mothers, could the cows tell that this was Krishna, who had become their calves.

Perhaps, the only difference was that the love, which both the women and the cows now felt, was more intense than ever. And he, too, who was

Another, returned their love as intensely as their own children had, except that his love was not a possessive one, it was not bound by the shackles of maya.

Thus, the vine of the gopis' love for their sons remained alive and grew, day by day, for it was founded in the Infinite One. Krishna spent a year as all the little gopas and calves that had gone missing in Vrindavana. He tended himself, as the blue gopa boy, and was his own multifarious companion.

One morning, when just a few days remained for a year to end, after Brahma had abducted the gopa boys and their calves, Krishna returned to the forest with his brother Rama. The grown herd, which was grazing upon Mount Govardhana, saw their calves in the forest below. Lowing in excitement, the cow mothers stampeded down the mountain, and the gopa men could not restrain them.

The cows flew down the mountain's side, swiftly as horses, their necks drawn back towards their humps, their tails aloft and milk spraying from their teats for love. So quickly did they run down Govardhana that it seemed they had only two legs, for all four of each cow was a blur.

At first the gopa men were annoyed and ran shouting after their herd. They found the going hard and came with some effort down twisting mountain trails. Their faces dark, they arrived to see the cows licking their young with such adoration, as if to devour them in love!

Suddenly, the same tide of affection gripped the grown cowherds too. The men seized up their sons and hugged and kissed them as fervently as their animals did their calves! They sniffed the tops of the boys' heads, embraced them, again and again, as if helplessly, then finally turned back up the mountain with their reluctant herd. The boys, all of them Krishna, saw that the gopa fathers wept as if they were parting from their boys forever.

Balarama was puzzled. He wondered at how the gopis seemed to love their sons as if they were babies, when in fact they were growing rapidly and had been weaned years ago. Shrewdly, he thought, 'When Krishna was born, I saw them drawn to him irresistibly, as if they could not help themselves. Now they are like that with their own sons.

Why, I feel for all of them what I do for Krishna. It is passing strange, and I wonder if this is the magic of the Devas or the Asuras?' Then he mused, 'I'm certain that Krishna must have something to do with it, or it would not affect me.'

Balarama found his thought drawn inward into dhyana; as a boy he did not recognise what this was. In his meditating mind he saw that all the boys were Krishna, living manifestations of the Satchitananda. He knew the gopa youngsters were meant to be amsavataras of the Devas and the Rishis; instead, now, he saw they were all Krishna himself.'

Balarama accosted Krishna that day, and asked what this was. Krishna told him, speaking even as Vishnu to Anantasesha.

A year passed, which by Brahma's time is a moment, a truthi. Brahma left the gopa boys, whom he had abducted, and their calves, asleep in beds of enchantment, and returned to Vrindavana. He found the same boys and calves frolicking around Krishna beside the blue river and the deep green jungle, just as they had a year ago.

He said, 'The young gopas and their herd are asleep in my world, upon magic beds. Who are these, then?' He found he could not tell the difference between these boys and their calves, and the others he had hidden away in Satyaloka.

Brahma, Creator of worlds and beings, found himself confused and distraught. He had attempted to test Vishnu, who, though he deludes all creation with his maya, is always beyond delusion. Now Brahma found himself dismayed. He found himself tired and weak.

As Brahma watched, amazed, he saw the young gopas and their calves all turn a deep blue hue, as of thunderheads. He saw them all four-armed and clad in fulgent yellow silk. He saw they all held a sea-conch, a disk, a mace and a lotus in each of four hands. He saw them crowned, with crocodile earrings, wearing unearthly vanamalas. He saw the Srivatsas whorled on each of their chests. They wore unearthly armlets, girdles, anklets and rings.

His eyes wide, upon all his faces, he saw each blue figure adorned thickly with scented tulasi wreaths, offered by bhaktas from across the world. They glanced sidelong, out of reddish eyes, their smiles as brilliant as the full moon rising – the signs of the rajoguna, by which He grants the desires of his bhaktas, and the sattvaguna by which he ensures their spiritual evolution.

Brahma saw all those Blue Gods worshipped by beings high and low, why, by himself, the Creator, down to the lowest creature, and clumps of grass; they all adored him with song, dance and every offering of adoration.

Brahma saw the eight Mahasiddhis, the occult powers like anima and mahima, around the dark forms. Maya, Vidya and the other Shaktis were there and the twenty-four great Principles, which the samkhyas have listed, which begin with Mahat.

The Blue Gods were being adored by Kaala, time, Svabhaava, nature, Samskara, the proclivities. Kama, desire, Karma, actions, the three Gunas – all these in brilliant embodied forms, whose brightness, however, seemed dim beside the lustre of the many Krishnas.

Brahma saw that they, the many Vishnus, were amsas of Satchitananda, and inexhaustible fonts of numberless auspicious qualities, and their extent could not begin to be glimpsed by even they that had achieved the enlightenment of the Upanishads. The Creator saw all the forms at once, as the Parabrahman, by whose radiance the universe manifests.

Trembling, Brahma on his Swan turned his gaze from the awesome spectacle. His eleven senses grew numb, utterly quiet, and he sat as the statue of a secondary deity does beside the main One, petrified by the glory and divinity of the God of Vraja.

The Lotus-born Creator's mind raced, though, 'Brahman is beyond thought and logic. He is infinitely majestic, self-luminous, and blissful. He transcends Prakriti and its effects. He is Un-born and is defined in the Upanishads only by what He is not – *neti, neti*. Yet I see that Brahman now as being so many!'

He could not tell which the original Krishna was, and which the maya Krishnas. Seeing Brahma afraid, Krishna, the Primal One, set aside the powerful spell he had cast over the four-faced Creator. Like a dead man finding life again, Brahma awoke from his trance. He rubbed his eyes, and saw the universe around him once more, and himself apart from it.

He looked around and saw Vrindavana; he saw Krishna in it. Because of Krishna's presence, Brahma saw how men and beasts, which are by nature inimical to one another, living at peace and in harmony. Violence, greed and anger seemed to have left their hearts.

Gazing, Brahma saw the Brahman, which is One, and is limitless consciousness, had assumed the form of a gopa boy, and now went in search of his lost friends and calves. He had an uneaten ball of rice mixed with curry in his hand.

Brahma alighted from the back of his Swan and prostrated before Krishna: stretched out like a golden staff at his feet. He touched Krishna's sacred feet with each of four crowned heads; the Pitamaha bathed those dark feet in tears of joy. He rose, but then remembered the miracles he had witnessed, and overwhelmed, fell again at the Blue One's feet.

This happened repeatedly; until finally, composing himself, Brahma stood up and, wiping his eyes, joined his palms together in worship and gave praise with a hymn. The four-faced one's voice quivered and his body shook with emotion."

BRAHMA'S STOTRA

SRI SUKA SAID, "BRAHMA SANG:

Nowmeedaya tehbhrahvapushe tadidambaraya gunjavatam saparipichchala-sanmukhaya; Vanyasraje kavalavetravishan venulakshmasriye mridupade pashu-pangajaya…

I salute you, Holiest One! O tender-footed son of Nanda, your skin the colour of a cloud, who wear clothes brilliant as lightning, your face splendid with red gunja-bead earrings, and a plume of peacock feathers. You wear a wildflower garland, carry a staff, a horn and a flute, and a ball of rice in your hands.

Lord, even in my deepest dhyana, I, Brahma, cannot fathom the mystery of this Avatara of yours, which is surely not made of the elements, but just of your transcendent will. You have assumed this form only to bless your bhaktas like me. Then, how will anyone plumb the Brahman that you are, your nature of Satchitananda?

Yet there are some, who never bother to struggle along the complex path of gyana, knowledge, but merely live their lives in whatever varna they are born, and listen to the Puranas of your divine nature from your greatest devotees. Such men, humble always, steeped in your lore, lose themselves – what they think, say and do – in bhakti. These, O Unconquerable One, surely conquer you.

Other men renounce devotion as an inferior discipline, bhakti that is like an eternal, abundant font of every material and spiritual blessing, and pursue mere knowledge, without love or renunciation. All they reap from this is the very strain through which they put themselves. It is lost labour, like husking chaff to cook rice!

O Pervasive One, who never decay! Countless are the Yogins that have attained you, to your ultimate condition, by offering whatever they do to you, and their desires as well. Others have come to you by worshipping you in the ninefold way, which begins with sravana, listening to your legends. Surely, it was their punya of past lives that led them to the path of bhakti, O Achyuta.

Ubiquitous, omniscient One, yet those that have restrained their senses and their minds, the purest souls, might comprehend your glory – when they realise that their own spirit, their Atman, is not apart from the Paramatman, the Supreme Spirit, which is beyond change and forms, for It is self-illumined and infinite.

Who, however great, can ever hope to count your gunas, who are the very cause and support of Prakriti and her gunas? An extraordinary being might, given a Kalpa, conceivably count the grains of dust that comprise this Earth. He might calculate the drops of moisture in the air, the stars in the universe; but none can enumerate your attributes and qualities, O Infinite One.

So, let the seeker be humble, and patiently live out the joys and woes that karma brings inevitably, unmoved by these. Let him surrender, body, heart and soul to you, and make you his sanctuary, depending on you to redeem him, with no shade of doubt that you will. Such a believer inherits moksha, even as a son does his own father's house.

My Lord, look at me and how foolish and petty I am! I wanted to pit my paltry powers against you, who are the un-Born One, the cause of the rest of us, the soul of us all. I wanted to satisfy myself by prevailing over you. And what am I but a spark of the eternal flame you are?

I beg you, forgive me my hubris; what I did, O One without decay, was out of ignorance. I was blinded by the pride of having created the universe, and by the dark rajoguna. I saw myself as being a Sovereign apart from your power. Pity me, Lord; be merciful to me that I am your servant and you are my master.

What am I, after all? Just a being with a limited body – this Brahmanda seven layers deep, of the evolutes of Prakriti: the Mahat, Ahamkara and the Panchabhutas. While you, O Krishna, bear a cosmic window upon every pore of your body, through which numberless Brahmandas fly like specks of dust!

When her baby kicks her from inside her womb, a mother does not take offence. Nothing is outside you. Am I not, then, to you as an infant to its mother? Won't you forgive me my offence?

Brahma, the un-born, emerged in the lotus that sprouted from Narayana's navel, as Vishnu lay upon his serpent bed, on the cosmic waters, the Ekarnava that had engulfed all the worlds – this is certainly the truth. Who can then say that I am not your child? I am never apart from you, but dwell in you always.

Are you not Narayana, the Atman, the support of all beings – *naram ayanam yasya sah*? Are you not Narayana who is he that prompts every being's actions from within – *naarasya ayanam pravarittih yasmaat, sah Naaraayanah*? You are also He that lies upon cosmic waters, Narayana, and he from whom those waters, the naara, flow.

But, lord, even that Form of yours, reclining upon Anantasesha, is only your maya. You are beyond even that Cosmic Form. For when I came to be inside the lotus that sprouted from your navel, I sought my maker in vain for a hundred cosmic years. High and low I searched, but in vain, and I did not see you anywhere upon the single sea, or even within myself.

Yet, when I sat in tapasya for a thousand years, I saw you clearly inside my heart, resplendent. Then, again, you vanished.

O Dispeller of Maya, only now, in this Avatara, you showed your mother the entire universe, when she looked into your mouth. Truly, the universe exists within your belly, as well as it seems to exist outside you, Krishna. Yet we experience the same universe seamlessly, and not as in a mirror image, which appears in reverse to the onlooker.

What is this but your maya? Today, you showed me that the universe has no existence without you. At first you were one Krishna. Then you were all the gopa boys and the little calves, as well. Then I saw you as many four-armed Vishnus, all of them being adored by the Devas and by me.

Lord, I saw numberless universes being spawned from the pores of your skin. And now, my Lord, you are before me as the infinite and single Brahman. To those that do not know your true nature, your deep mystery and majesty, it appears that, abiding in your Prakriti, you create the universe by spreading your maya everywhere, by your free will.

You seem to assume the form of me, Brahma, to create the universe, of Vishnu to sustain it, and of three-eyed Siva to destroy it. The truth is there is just You, always and forever, and all the rest is your Yogamaya.

Un-born, you are born among the Devas, the Rishis, among men and beasts: to destroy the arrogance of evil ones, and to bless the good and the saintly, those that seek spiritual salvation. Almighty One, Bhagavan, Lord of all Yogis! Your maya as the manifest world is inscrutable, and who can tell what form or guise it will take?

Men can feel your profound mystery reflected in the world; beyond that they cannot explain anything. This world is also just a dream without you – meaningless and the cause of endless misery. Your mysterious maya projects the world onto your Self – who are always of the nature of Satchitananda – so that men perceive it as existing on its own.

You are the Single Being, beside whom there is no second. You are the Atman, the Antaryamin in all things, in us all. You are the Primordial One; you are the Truth. You are the Self-manifested One, limitless, the Cause of all causes.

You are the deathless One, eternally blissful. In you, spirit and body are not distinct, and you are forever free from the shackles of Prakriti. You, O Lord, are everlasting.

The man who sees, with the eye of the Upanishad opened for him by an illumined Guru, the Universal Spirit, the Brahman, everywhere and within himself as well – that man frees himself from samsara, the sea of births and deaths. The man who does not see the Atman in himself and in all things, his very ignorance projects the world around him.

Yet when gyana dawns, the world that seemed real melts away at its very foundation, just as the illusion of a snake, projected momentarily onto a rope, dissolves into the rope. Bondage and salvation – neither is real, but only two names that arise when the jiva does not know you.

If one reflects deeply on the Atman, which is always pure consciousness and apart from the duality of Prakriti and her gunas, one finds the soul has no condition other than being truth and bliss. The sun knows neither day nor night, but is always luminous. How great is the delusion of the ignorant! They think that you are other than their real self, and take their body to be their self. Then they seek you far and wide, outside themselves, O Indweller, Soul of all.

Infinite God, the wise seek you within the body, which is matter and spirit: discarding everything that is not the true and deathless self. Pious men discover that the rope is not the serpent, that the Soul is not the world of appearances or the body.

But it is your bhakta, blessed with the faintest grace from your lotus feet, who knows the true power and glory of the Lord. Your blessing illumines him in a moment, while he that seeks you for an age, but does not find your grace, remains unenlightened.

O Saviour! Let me always be your bhakta, and have the greatest fortune of your blessing – be it as Brahma in this birth, or as a man or even a beast in another. Let me always be a servant of your sacred feet, my Lord.

How blessed are the gopi women and the cows of Vraja – that you drank their milk from breast and udder, in delight, as gopa child and calf! And drinking, you were satisfied, Omnipresent Lord, who are not gratified by even the most holy yagnas and their offerings. Ah, how amazing is the fortune of Nanda and the gopas – that the eternal and perfect Brahman himself is their friend and protector, you who are bliss embodied.

No one can describe the extent of their fortune, so let it rest for now. But we eleven Gods, who preside over the indriyas, are fortunate as well. For don't we constantly drink the sweet bliss of the intoxicating amrita that flows from your feet, sipping it from the cups that are these eleven senses.

Soma drinks from the cup of the mind. I, Brahma, do so from the intellect. Siva drinks from Ahamkara. The Dikpalas drink from hearing. Vayu Deva drinks from the sense of touch. Surya Deva drinks from sight. Varuna drinks from the cup of taste. The Asvini Kumaras sip of the cup of scent. Agni Deva drinks from the vessel of speech. Indra and Upendra sip from the hands and the feet.

How much more fortunate the cowherds are, that drink of your nearness with all their senses! Why, I would be born as any of the living species in Vrindavana today, even as the humble grass. Most of all, I would be the grass in Gokula, for then I might bathe in the padadhuli from the feet of any of its gopas or gopis, who are all your greatest bhaktas. The bond of your love has made their very lives the sweet Lord Mukunda, the dust from whose feet the Vedas and the Srutis still anxiously seek.

I am bewildered when I wonder if there is another gift, loftier than this union with you, which you might bestow upon the people of Vraja – these gopas that have given their all to you: their homes, wealth, friends and children, their bodies, their prana and their minds.

Putana came here in the guise of one that loved you, while in fact she meant you dire harm. Even she, and her kin who followed her, found moksha from you. When you bless those that are your deadly enemies thus, surely you will give more to those who have surrendered themselves to you. Perhaps, the answer is that you yourself become their servant, and such bhakti is more exalted even than moksha!

Until a bhakta has not abandoned himself and his life to you, so that he is yours and you his, the passions of his heart are his enemies, his home is a prison, and all his attachments are bondage. Once the surrender is effected, and all these old enemies turned over to you, they transform themselves into the most potent gifts for the life of devotion. When the Lord becomes one's own! With such bhakti, a man becomes a natural Sannyasi.

You, Lord, are beyond any earthly bonds. You appear to assume them, this dark form of yours, just to heighten the ecstasy of your bhaktas, who have made you their sanctuary. Ah, let those that can, understand! For all my words are of little use. Not by any effort of my mind, speech or my body can I even begin to fathom an iota of what you truly are!

Sweet Krishna, allow me to leave now. You are the universal witness, and you know everything about us all. You are the only Master of the cosmos. The worlds, which are described as being my body, rest in you.

O you are the Sun, which makes the lotus of the Vrishnis bloom. You are the Moon, which causes the ocean of joy to rise in tide in the hearts of holy men and all innocent beings. You are the Sun again, which dispels the darkness of heretic teachings. You are the Fire that devours the tyrants of the world.

You are the Lord, whom Surya and the other Devas worship. O Sri Krishna, I, too offer you my worship forever!'

With this, Brahma walked round Krishna in pradakshina thrice, prostrating repeatedly before the Blue One, then mounted his Swan again and vanished back to his own realm, Satyaloka.

When he had gone, Krishna brought his little gopa friends and their calves back to the very place on the white sand beside the river where they had all been lunching off leaf and stone plates, a year ago. By his maya, that year seemed like half a moment to the boys and the little beasts. For there is nothing among all the stars and through deep time, whose memory the Lord's maya cannot efface. Isn't it by that very maya that the very world has forgotten that, in truth, it is just the Atman?

No matter how many scriptures men study, no matter how great the gurus are that teach them, they cannot remember who they are – the Eternal and Single Soul. Such is the absolute power of Krishna's maya!

His friends, the gopa boys, said to Krishna, 'Ah, you have come back so quickly. Why, we haven't eaten a ball of rice since you went. Come Krishna, sit down and let us eat together.'

Krishna laughed softly, then sat and ate with his little friends. Came evening and the time to return home to the cowherd settlement. As they walked back with the herd, Krishna pointed out the dried carcass of Aghasura.

Brilliant he was – with peacock feathers in his hair and mineral colours on his skin. Swarming around him, his little friends played loudly on their flutes and horns and the sky echoed with their songs of Krishna's awesome deeds. The calves, also, thronged around Krishna and, fondling them, stroking their soft ears, he came home to the gopis and such a feast he and his vivid companions were for the women's eyes.

In Vraja, the boys began to shout, all together, a year after the event though they did not know it, how Krishna had slain the monstrous serpent in the jungle, and saved all their lives.

'This joy of Yasodha,' they sang, 'our Krishna, killed an awesome serpent.' "

Parikshit asked thoughtfully, "Tell me, Suka Deva, how is it that the gopis of Vraja felt a greater love for Krishna than they did for the sons born of their own bodies?"

Sri Suka said, "Rajan, every being loves their own self more than anything else, for this is only natural. We love our children and our wealth only because we think of them as parts of ourselves, as belonging to us.

Thus men never love their children, the homes or their gold as much as they do their own bodies, their selves. For these are never entirely identified with the self, but only perceived as belonging to the self.

Maharaja, even they that think of their bodies as being their selves, we see that they love their own bodies more than they do others, whoever they are. If even the body were perceived as just a possession, a man would only love it as another object that belonged to him, and not as much as the Atman. However, in most cases the man does identify the body with the Atman, the serpent and the rope. Once, we concede that the body is only the seat of the Atman, it cannot possibly be as dear as the Soul.

As the body ages and decays, man still clings desperately to his life – this is because he identifies his body with his self, and feels that, not merely the body, but the Atman is dying. So, Parikshit, what all creatures hold most precious is indeed the Atman, or whatever they identify as being that. Anything that they value in this mundane existence is for the sake of that Atman, directly or possessively.

Krishna, O King, is the Self of all selves, the Paramatman. By his maya, he incarnated himself as a man. Those that know Krishna know that the universe, of beings that do or do not move, is only his Rupa, his form, and his being. Nothing is apart from or outside him.

Everything manifest has its substance in the causes of karmic nature that have become effects. Of all causes, Krishna is the foundation, the single basic essence. Think, therefore, is there anything at all that is not him? So, indeed, the gopis and the cows adored not merely Krishna but their final selves that they knew in him, blissfully.

The lotus feet of the Lord are renowned for their power to bless and for being the sanctuary of all men of virtue. Whoever makes Krishna's feet the raft upon which to cross the ocean of samsara, they find that interminable sea of grief like a puddle made by the water in the imprint of a calf's hoof. They attain the supreme condition, from which there is no return or fall.

So, Rajan, this is why the gopa boys told the story of Aghasura only a year after their adventure with the demon serpent. Whoever listens to or narrates the story of how Krishna went into the forest with his friends, of how Agha was slain, of the meal upon the riverbank, of Brahma's abduction of the boys and the calves, how Krishna assumed their forms for a year, and how he dazzled Brahma with the vision of many Vishnus and of the Brahman, of Brahma's hymn, and of the return of the real calves and boys – he shall attain dharma, artha, kama and moksha, too.

In this manner, Krishna and Balarama spent their early boyhood, which is known as Kaumara, the time until they were five – at joyful play with their gopa friends in Vraja and in Vrindavana and upon the banks of the midnight-blue Yamuna."

DHENUKA MOKSHA

SRI SUKA SAID, "WHEN THEY WERE SIX, RAMA AND KRISHNA WERE allowed to tend the grown herd, too. They would take the cows and bulls to far, unexplored parts of Vrindavana, and sanctify the Earth wherever they went with the touch of their sacred feet.

One morning, with Rama beside him, and the other gopa boys around them, singing – often his praises – and he himself playing ecstatically on his flute, Krishna set out for the jungle. He walked at the head of the herd, and they arrived in a familiar glade, with emerald grass all round, encircled by bright trees, flower laden.

The glade buzzed with thousands of bees, while a feast of birds of every kind also sipped nectar from the flowers. Deer wandered serenely in and out of the glade, and a fragrant breeze, cooled by blowing across rivers and great lakes as calm as the minds of good men, wafted the scents of lotuses through the trees. Seeing the place that day, Krishna decided that this was where they would spend their morning.

The gopa boys and the Avatara came upon trees with scarlet flames for leaves, which seemed to bow to the Avatara, their crowns bent down almost to the ground with glowing burdens – offerings of fruit and flowers. Krishna, first of all beings, smiled in joy to see the soft glory of the jungle.

His brother Balarama spoke secretly to Krishna, in his heart, 'Look, my Great One, the trees prostrate at your feet, which the Devas have worshipped! They bring you offerings of flowers and fruit, which they bear on their heads. It seems they are asking for expiation from whatever sin has condemned them to be born as trees, and to have to stand unmoving, bared to ever vagary of nature and the seasons.

Original One, the honeybees sing your praises, which bless the world; they worship you with every sound they make, even the smallest one. Krishna, I feel sure that they are some celestial Rishis, counted among your greatest bhaktas. They don't want to be parted from you while you have come to the earth seeming to assume a human form – no, not even when you hide yourself in the deepest virgin forest.

Look how the peacocks dance for you, my brother. Look how the female deer glance at you, sidelong, just like the gopis do, and make your heart glad! Listen to the kokilas singing in the branches for you, welcoming you and all that come with you to their home. All good men honour you, and now even the wild creatures of the jungle pay you the same homage.

Ah, this jungle is blessed, all its earth and grass, because your holy feet have walked here. The trees and plants are blessed because they bear the marks of your fingernails upon them. The rivers, mountains, birds and beasts are blessed that you have looked upon them out of your eyes, full of mercy. And blessed are the gopis that you have hugged them, just as Sri Lakshmi always wants you to embrace her.'

Krishna and his friends ranged the banks of the Yamuna, over hills and through the deep forest, in and around Vrindavana. Covered from head to foot with wildflower garlands, Balarama and he sang to the nectar-drunk honeybees, in their buzzing tongue, while the other gopa boys sang the praises of the divine brothers.

Krishna glided and cooed like the graceful swans floating like dreams upon lake and river, making his companions laugh – so wonderful were his imitations, as if he was indeed the king of birds, and had their lives. He strutted like the peacocks, his hands unfurled like their tails behind him; he danced their mystic dance.

Whenever some cows wandered off a ways, he would low to them to come back in a deep and uncanny voice, exactly like theirs but reverberant as thunder, calling each one by her name. Then he would sing like every bird in the forest – the chakora of legend, which lives on just silver moonlight, krauncha, chakravaka, bharadwaaja, and barhi – finding their individual pitch and tone to perfection, so their mates and their young sang back to him.

Krishna mimicked the terror of the little creatures of the jungle, when a tiger roared or a leopard sawed some way off from them. When Balarama grew tired and flopped down on the ground, laying his head in a friend's lap, Krishna would wash his feet in cool water and massage them.

Then, holding hands tenderly, the brothers would cry encouragement and praise the mock duels, the song and dances, and the other games of their companions. Krishna would tire himself at wrestling with the other boys, and then he would lie upon the earth with his head in the lap of an older boy, as if resting it on a pillow. Or else, he would lay his dark head in a clump of flowers growing at the foot of a tree.

Now some of the gopa boys would massage his sacred feet, while others fanned him with leaf fans or their hands, and thought themselves so lucky to do this. Other boys, their hearts full of love, would sing to him, softly praising his deeds since he was a child, in unending wonder.

Thus, with his true Self hidden by his own maya, he, the Parabrahman, assumed the form and the life of a gopa child and, with his brother Rama always beside him, spent those blissful days among simple gypsy cowherders, living a humble, wondrous rustic life.

Another day, the gopa boy Sridaman, who was a great friend of Rama and Krishna, said lovingly to them, 'Mighty Balarama, Krishna, scourge of demons, there is a grove of palm trees not far from here. The branches are laden with delicious fruit, which lie upon the earth fallen but wasted because the Asura Dhenuka has forbidden anyone to enter the grove.

Rama, Krishna: Dhenuka has the form of a dreadful donkey, and all his kin surround him, each one as strong as himself. He is a flesh-eater and a cannibal, and men dare not approach the place he haunts; even birds and beasts do not go to the secret palm grove for fear of the demons.

But ah, the palm fruit you find in that grove are incomparable.' Sridaman paused to sniff the air. 'Can you smell that wonderful scent, Krishna? My mouth waters, and how I wish I could eat some of the fruit. Rama, all of us want the fruit of the palm grove. Help us eat some!'

Krishna looked around him and saw that, indeed, all the gopa boys were as eager as Sridama. With a laugh, the brothers set out for the hidden grove. When they arrived there, Balarama immediately seized a tree and began to shake it with his divine might, rather like a young elephant. The palm nuts came showering down around him, in their fine clusters, and the gopa boys fell to the feast before them.

Balarama moved on to the next tree, when the demon with the shape of a donkey, erupted from the deeper forest, turned his back on Rama, quick as thinking, and kicked him across his chest with hooves like lightning. Taken unawares, Balarama fell on the ground. The fanged, green Dhenuka circled him, braying in the most awful way.

Once more, he turned his back on the supine Rama and coiled his powerful back to bring those sharp hard hooves down on the fallen boy, this time to finish him. Dhenuka lashed out, but swifter than the beast, Balarama seized the donkey's hind legs in a God's hand, stronger than time.

Leaping up, Krishna's brother swung the shrieking donkey round and round, still holding his two hooves in one small, uncanny hand. He whirled the demon round quicker than light, so he was first a blur, then invisible for the speed of that prodigious whirling.

Dhenukasura died from that awesome spinning, and casually as he might a twig, Balarma tossed his carcass high into the air and it fell on the crown of a lofty palm, and stayed there for a moment. Then the tree came crashing down, struck another palm next to it, which also fell, against yet another tree, and that too brought one more palm down. Soon, a bald line had streaked its way through the palm grove – a line of trees uprooted by the unearthly strength of Balarama the mighty.

And what wonder at this, for Rama was he that is the rest of the God in whom all the galaxies, why, all the universes dwell, as do the threads, which are its warf and woof, in a piece of cloth. Rama was the Infinite One himself, in amsa.

Now a whole herd of the weird donkey demons, fanged, horned and with strangely coloured skins, rushed out braying horribly at the incarnate brothers – to crush them, gore them, trample them, dismember them. As if playing a delightful game, Krishna and Rama seized the donkeys, one after the other, by their legs. Whirling them round until they died, the brothers flung them high into the air so they landed on the tops of the palms.

More trees came down, shaking the earth. The forest floor was strewn with the corpses of the macabre donkeys, with fallen palms, and their fine fruit scattered everywhere. The ground was rather like a darkling sky with clouds in many colours. When the Devas saw, from their heavens, what the two Avataras had done they flung down unworldly flowers upon Balarama and Krishna, and played on their exquisite instruments and sang in their transcendent voices.

After Dhenuka and his asuras died, everyone came to eat the wonderful palm fruit from that grove – gopas, birds and beasts – and the cows came to graze the rich grass that grew in this part of the jungle.

That evening, Krishna of the lotus eyes, who blesses those that listen to the legends of his life, returned triumphantly to Vraja, with Rama and the other boys. The little gopas hymned Rama and Krishna in their young voices, singing in great excitement about what the brothers had done.

When he came home to Vraja, the cowherd settlement, a throng of gopis was waiting anxiously for him, as if for their very lives to return to them. His long hair, which now hung down to his shoulders, was caked in the dust raised by the hooves of the herd. Peacock feathers glimmered there, and wildflowers.

His face was lit by a smile, as a dark sky by the sun. His incomparable eyes shone, so full of charm and mischief. He had his flute to his lips and played rapturously on it, while his small friends sang to the tune and surged around him.

The cowherd women, the nubile young gopis, drank in the sight of him – as if their long eyes were honeybees and he was the flower-nectar. They had been so sad being separated from him through the day, and now favoured him with sidelong looks, full of strange shyness for the overwhelming emotion he evoked in them. Smiling at them, glowing with earth and flowers and song, Krishna sauntered into Vraja, a little wild king!

Yasodha and Rohini waited for their sons, and now hugged and fondled them in welcome. The mothers rubbed fragrant natural oils and unguents into their boys' soft skins, bathed them in clear warm water, dressed them in the finest clothes, daubed them with perfumes, and draped bright garlands around their necks.

Hugging them repeatedly, Yasodha and Rohini fed the boys the tastiest delicacies they had spent half the day cooking, and finally tucked them into cosy beds, happy and tired. No sooner did they heads touch the pillows than both were fast asleep, after the adventurous day."

Suka Deva paused before continuing, "Raja, on another clear hot morning, Krishna, Rama and their friends brought the herd down to the Yamuna to drink. They had come a good way through the forest, and were all parched. Cows and boys splashed into the water and drank thirstily.

In moments, they staggered out, boy and beast alike, their faces turning a ghastly hue. Crying out weakly, lowing pathetically, they fell on the white sand of the riverbank. They were dead, all of them. Krishna, master of all masters of yoga, was not affected by the virulent poison in the water. He approached his friends and the cows, and revived them with just a look from his divine eyes, which are said to exude the amrita of immortality.

Boys and cows awoke from death. The animals staggered to their feet, shaking their heads, while the young cowherds sat up, rubbing their eyes, puzzlement on their faces, uncertain what had happened. Then they saw the dark streams of steaming poison that laced the blue waters of the river, and they knew in their hearts that Krishna had fetched them back from the other world."

THE CHASTENING OF KALIYA

SRI SUKA SAID, “WHEN KRISHNA SAW HOW HIS PRECIOUS YAMUNA’S midnight-blue water was laced with the venom of the black serpent king Kaliya, he decided he must rid the jungle of the snake.”

Raja Parikshit asked, “How did Kaliya come to Vrindavana and to the river? Had he been there for a long time, and how did Krishna find and punish him? Ah, my heart longs to hear about this legendary deed of the Lord. Holy One, how can anyone ever listen enough to Krishna’s amazing life – and the deeds of Him who is the limitless and everfree Being, who came down into our world as a gopa boy!”

Sri Suka said, “Along the course of the Yamuna, which is also known as the Kalindi, was a pool, and beneath it a deep underwater cavern that boiled with Kaliya’s venom. So noxious was it that birds flying above it fell dead into the water from the fumes. For leagues around that place, every plant, bird and beast had perished from the deadly poison borne by the forest wind.

Krishna learnt about Kaliya the day his friends and herd were poisoned beside the river, and he decided to rid the forest of this menace. After all, that was what the Avatara had come for – to deliver the world from demons, from evil.

He arrived at Kaliya’s pool, and shinned up into a kadamba tree that grew out across the water. Girding his loins and clapping his hands across his arms, in explosive challenge, Krishna dived into the water, smoking with Kaliya’s dark venom. At the impact of his body, the body of God, the poisoned river water rose like flames and broke the banks of the Yamuna in tide for four hundred hastas in every direction. Of course, this was small wonder, for it was Krishna.

Now he began to swim nonchalantly in the seething pool on the river, his awesome strokes like thunderclaps. He was like some great elephant bathing. Kaliya heard Krishna; and came out from his cave. He saw him and Krishna was beautiful – his skin delicate and the colour of a blue thundercloud. He wore bright yellow, his wide chest bore the mark of the Srivatsa, and he smiled radiantly, his feet of the hue of the lotus threshing the smoky water.

In cold fury, Kaliya swam sinuously towards the young Avatara. Winding himself in a flash round Krishna, so he was quickly hidden by monstrous coils, the serpent began to sting him again and again in all his tender and vital parts.

Now Krishna's young gopa friends and their herd arrived on the banks of Kaliya's pool. They saw the one who was their very life clasped in shiny black coils, his eyes shut. Krishna seemed to be dead and the gopa boys fainted and fell on the ground. The cows gazed out of their large soft eyes at the ghastly sight before them. Tears trickled down their gentle faces and they stood lowing dismally in grief.

Meanwhile, in Vraja, evil omens seethed everywhere – on land and air, and the cowherds' bodies evinced the strangest signs: their eyelids twitched uncontrollably, their skins crawled with nameless dread. Nanda saw that Balarama had not gone out to pasture that day; he and the other gopas were terrified that the omens signified Krishna's death.

All of them set out in search of him who was like prana to them – young and old, adults and mites, gopas and the trembling gopis with tears streaming down their faces. They were as desperate as cows whose calves had strayed away and gone lost. None of them still knew or believed who Krishna truly was, except his brother Balarama who was himself an amsa of the Blue God. Balarama showed no trace of anxiety, but only smiled to himself to see the panic of the others.

The gopas followed the hoofmarks of the herd, and arrived on the banks of the Yamuna. Here and there, they saw Krishna's footprints, which bore the auspicious marks of the lotus and the grain of barley, a goad, a thunderbolt and a pennant.

Following the trail, they arrived at the pool in the river, Kaliya's domain. They saw Krishna held fast in giant coils and the serpent's vast head above him. They saw the marks of huge fangs all over Krishna's body. Strewn about on the sand by the river, they saw the other boys, all of them unconscious, as if they had been felled by lightning. The cows and bulls never paused in their piteous lowing.

The gopas and gopis stood stunned. They saw Krishna in Kaliya's dreadful coils, and they knew that without him, his sparkling black eyes, his wonderful way of speaking and his smile so full of enchantment, their own lives would lose all meaning.

With a scream, Yasodha ran toward the water, but the other gopis somehow restrained her. They wept as she did and, suddenly, as if in a trance, began to recount the wondrous legends of his infancy and boyhood. Their eyes never left his face, which Kaliya held above the water.

Nanda and some other gopas now surged forward into the Yamuna, but Balarama cried to them sternly to stop. 'You don't know Krishna,' said he, 'he is not dead.'

Hearing his brother's voice and the sobs of the gopis seemed to awaken Krishna. His eyes flew open, and his body began to grow alarmingly in the serpent's coils. Kaliya hissed deafeningly, like a storm, and blew venom out of his nostrils like black sea-spray. He unfurled his immense hood, and thrust his neck up high into the air.

With strength the snake could not credit, Krishna slipped out from Kaliya's coils. The king snake kept his gaze, like a red-hot copper-pot, riveted on the Avatara. Krishna swam fluently, at blinding speed, round and round Kaliya, just as an eagle flies to hypnotise a cobra. Kaliya followed Krishna's movement with his hood, his eyes on fire, his forked tongue darting in and out of his lipless mouth.

Kaliya waited for the right moment to strike; he waited for Krishna to swim a little slower. But as he spun his hood and neck round, he grew dizzy, and then Krishna swam within reach and slowed his pace. Kaliya lunged weakly at him, huge fangs bared. In a flash, Krishna thrust the tired serpent's head down, sprang out of the water and onto the king snake's hood!

Krishna's feet now shone ruddy with the light from the clusters of rubies embedded on Kaliya's head. He, the source and master of all the arts, now began to dance on the serpent's hood. At first, he danced to no music other than the eternal, subtle music in his heart. But quickly, a celestial host appeared – Gandharvas, Siddhas, Charanas and Apsaras – in great rapture, and they played on unworldly instruments, sang in supernal voices, and danced as well.

They provided complex and wonderful rhythms on mridangas', panavas, and other instruments of percussion, and flung vivid showers of petals and flowers over him, the Dancer on Kaliya's hood. As any segment of that huge hood was raised in ire, Krishna, who had come to quell the pride of the evil ones of the earth, would trample savagely on it with dancing feet.

Blood broke at the snake's jaws; it oozed through his flared nostrils. Instead of venom, blood sprayed from Kaliya's malignant eyes. He still hissed like a gale, but with every moment of Krishna's magic dance, Kaliya weakened, until he seemed to fall into a swoon. Yet his hood remained raised, now as if just to provide a platform for Krishna to dance upon.

Flowers poured out of the sky on the Pristine One. All the hundred curved segments of Kaliya's hood were bruised by the Lord's punishing feet. Wounded and vomiting blood, Kaliya's arrogance was crushed. Suddenly, he appeared to realise who it was that danced on his hood. In a deep recess of his black heart, Kaliya sought refuge in that Being, and begged for his mercy.

Seeing their husband stamped upon by Krishna's flying heels, Kaliya's serpent wives and his brood of snake children rose around him in the river, in grief. They saw that if Krishna did not stop dancing, their lord and sire would perish beneath the dark feet. Setting their children before them, the serpent wives came with folded hands and prostrated in the water before the Blue Dancer.

Sobbing they came, for sanctuary and mercy. They raised their voices in a strange and beautiful song to the master of all the living.

The serpent wives said, 'To punish one that does evil is just indeed. But you look with equal eyes upon your child and your enemy, though you have incarnated yourself to be the bane of sinners. You have come to save the world and to save the evil ones whom you destroy.

Why, you have blessed us with your dance, O Hari, for your punishment has purified Kaliya of his sins. Surely, our lord was born as a black snake only because of his crimes. Your anger is the greatest blessing he could have, because you have set your sacred feet upon his head. So he must have been a great and humble tapasvin too, loving all creation, that he is so fortunate!

Or else, he must have been a magnificent Karma Yogin, who served all the living with no thought for himself or for any gain, that he is so fortunate today! For that is what pleases you, who are the life in every jiva.

Lord, Sri Devi relinquished all her pleasures and sat in tapasya for an age, to have the blessing of the padadhuli from your feet. We, his wives, cannot begin to fathom what great punya from another life has granted Kaliya the incomparable privilege of having you dance upon his head.

Those that seek the sanctuary of your precious feet, and become as one with their dust, no longer desire any Swarga or sovereignty over any loka, however lofty. They do not wish even to be Brahma, if they can, nor for lordship over blessed Rasatala. Why, they do not even wish to be set free from the endless births and deaths of samsara; for them, serving you is the highest condition, beyond which there is no other.

Kaliya was born of tamas, and his nature is fierce and savage. Yet you have granted him the blessing of your feet, Lord, which the greatest Rishis hardly ever find. Life after life, jivas caught upon the whirling wheel of samsara pray that they attain to your sacred feet, and doing so, find moksha.

Ah, we salute you, Lord of Gods, Indweller, who control the highest ones, even Brahma, who abide in all the elements, who were the First, before there was anything else, who are untouched by Prakriti, who are the Paramatman.

We bow to you, whose knowledge and consciousness are perfect, complete, who are the source of infinite power, who are Prakriti's master, who transcend the gunas, who are the Parabrahman and beyond change.

We prostrate before you, who are Time, the umbilical support of time, and the witness of all the divisions of time. We prostrate before you, O Creator and created, cause of all things.

We salute you, who are the soul of the elements, the senses, vital energy, the mind, the intellect, consciousness – you who obscure the gyana of jivas by the threefold ego, Ahamkara.

We salute you, who are infinite, infinitely subtle, immutable, omniscient, you whom every philosophy attempts to describe, variously, each in its limited way. You are the Word, its meaning – the power that words describe, as also their inherent power to describe.

We bow to you, the origin of all the paths to true knowledge. You are the Absolute Wisdom, independent of, and prior to, all knowledge; you are the font of revelation, the master of learning. You are manifest as the Vedas, which prescribe karmas for prosperity in this world and the next, and relinquishment of karma to attain sayujyata, and even moksha.

We worship you, O Krishna, O Rama, you Vaasudeva, you Pradyumna, you Aniruddha – You, O master of all bhaktas. We salute you, who are hidden in the gunas of Prakriti, who enliven and illumine the gunas and, thus shrouded, appear as the manifold universe.

You rule the four vyuhas of the inner being – the mind, reason, intellect and ego. Obeisance to you, who are perceived only by the inner faculties, while you are their witness and transcend them. Only you know yourself, and you are beyond the ken of knowledge, you O self-effulgent One.

Obeisance to you, who work invisibly, who are the source of this fleeting universe, who are he that controls the senses, who are beyond our comprehension. You are the silent Muni, immersed in the bliss of your own Atman.

Obeisance to you, who knows the fate of all things high and low, who are the controller of the universe, who are unaffected by the life and death of the universe. You are the witness of the universe; you are the cause of everything.

Lord, you have no desire. Yet in divine and endless play, you assume the power of time, and with a look from your eyes, animate all beings and create, nurture and destroy the cosmos.

In this world there are three kinds of beings, the sattvik, the rajasic and the tamasic – the calm, the restless and the stuporous. All three are amsas of you. But since you have now come to uphold dharma, you will favour the serene ones, your bhaktas, the creatures of sattva.

Lord, any master must forgive at least the first offence of his servant. So, forgive Kaliya his sins, for he committed them out of ignorance. Holy God, be merciful! Our husband's life ebbs away beneath your punishing feet. A woman's life is her husband. We beg you, give him back to us alive, for we at least deserve your pity.

Command us, and we will do whatever you ask, in faith, to save ourselves from terror.'

When the serpent wives hymned and begged him thus, Krishna stopped his dance upon Kaliya's hood. All its bent segments were bleeding from the Lord's dancing soles. The snake king had fainted. Slowly, he recovered consciousness. His eyes blinked open; now they were surprisingly clear, and the wrath seemed to have left them.

Still gasping for breath, Kaliya bowed to Krishna and said, 'Lord, we serpents are born evil, our natures given to passion and anger. One cannot escape one's nature; their nature fills even men's hearts with the vilest lusts.

You created the universe in infinite variety – of character, prowess, heredity, intelligence and species. In your creation, we Nagas are born to extreme ferocity, we are the slaves of our quick and vicious fury. This, too, is your great maya, Krishna, and how can we deluded jivas overcome what you create without your grace?

Only you can help us, only you decide if you will save us or destroy us.'

Kaliya spoke with great humility, and now Krishna replied in a God's voice to the serpents that importuned him. 'Nagas, you cannot remain here in the Yamuna, for men and their herds come to drink her water. Kaliya, take your wives and your brood and go to the ocean. Dwell among the waves from now.

Any man who recalls this story of how I danced upon your head shall never have to fear the snakes of the earth. Why, he that bathes in this pool where you lived, Kaliya, and where I danced upon your hood, and worships me here, shall be freed from all his sins.'

Krishna paused, thoughtful for a moment. He said, 'You once lived upon the island called Ramanaka, but you came here to the jungle because you feared Suparna the Eagle. Now you bear my footmarks on your hood, and seeing them, Garuda will not harm you. Go now back to your island home and live there without fear of the Golden Eagle and his kind.'

Now, with deep joy and bhakti, Kaliya and his wives brought exquisite serpent gifts to Krishna. They worshipped him with offerings of exotic fabrics, golden necklaces set with fabulous jewels, great solitaires and other ornaments, rare perfumes and pastes, and garlands of unfading blue lotuses.

When he had made several pradakshinas round the God whose mount is Garuda, Kaliya bent his hood at Krishna's feet and said, 'Lord, now let me return to Ramanaka in the ocean with my wives and my children.'

Krishna gave him leave and the great snakes glided away, never to return to Vrindavana. Since that day, the Yamuna has flowed clear, untainted by serpent venom, and its water as sweet as amrita."

MORE ABOUT KALIYA

PARIKSHIT ASKED, "MASTER, TELL ME WHY KALIYA WAS FIRST FORCED to leave his island home Ramanaka. What offence did he give Garuda Suparna, that the Lord's Eagle hunted him?"

Sri Suka said, "It was common practice for men to bring monthly offerings to the great Nagas, so they would not be bitten by any snake and be free of their fear. On paurnima days, of the full moon, the serpents that received these offerings brought a portion of them to Garuda, so that he would not attack them.

Kadru's son Kaliya became arrogant because of his strength and the virulence of his venom. One night of the full moon, he slighted the lord of eagles by taking for himself the offerings that the other Nagas had brought for Garuda. When Garuda heard this, Vishnu's mount was livid. Like an arrow, he flew to the place where Kaliya had stolen his offerings, meaning to kill the snake.

Kaliya, unafraid, faced the Golden Eagle fiercely, his hood of a hundred segments raised and unfurled, his eyes wide and ablaze, and spitting venom. As Garuda flew at him, Kaliya darted at the Eagle with his great fangs and stung him repeatedly.

But Suparna was Vishnu's mount and, unperturbed by the serpent king's smoking venom, he struck Kaliya across his head with his left wing of the hue of gold. So awesome was that blow that Kaliya slithered away like a worm, or a streak of black and slimy lightning upon the earth. He dove under the ocean waves and escaped.

Garuda chased the great snake, over the sea and across the land of Bharata, until Kaliya arrived at the pool in the Kalindi and plunged into the Yamuna's midnight-blue water. Garuda could not come to the pool, and abandoned the chase. Ever since, Kaliya dwelt in the Yamuna, until the day Krishna danced upon his hood and crushed his pride again."

"Why could Garuda not come to the pool on the river, Muni?"

Sri Suka said, "Once, an age ago, the Rishi Saurabhi lived beside the Kalindi, and he forbade a hungry Garuda from fishing in its holy waters. But Garuda was so famished that he dived into the Yamuna, caught a single fish and ate it.

That fish was the king of all the fish of the Yamuna, and Saurabhi found every fish in the river forlorn and dejected at the death of their lord. Moved to pity for the fish and the other creatures of those forests, the Sage cursed Garuda, 'If you ever come to hunt any creature that lives in the river Kalindi, Garuda, you will die!'

Only Kaliya knew about this curse, no other serpent, and he came with his brood to live in the pool of the Yamuna, until Krishna sent him back to Ramanaka.

When the gopas saw Krishna wade out from the pool, unhurt, and now wearing the precious gifts the serpents had given him – the ornaments and silks, sandalwood paste, the solitaires – they awakened from their stupor. Crying for joy, they came crowding round him, hugging and kissing him.

They were like a corpse to which prana has returned. Truly, their lives returned to Yasodha, to Rohini, to Nanda, all the gopis and gopas. Balarama was overjoyed and clasped Krishna in his arms and kissed him over and over. The bulls and cows, and their calves fairly sang for joy, and they danced quaintly upon the riverbank.

The trees that grew beside the river, which had drooped, leafless and burnt by Kaliya's venom, grew green again, and bore flower and fruit. Now, Nanda's gurus came to him with their wives, and said, 'By great good fortune your son has escaped from Kaliya's very coils. To thank the Gods and to show your joy, it is proper that you give us some dakshina.'

Nanda was only too pleased to give those brahmanas lavish gifts of cows and gold. As for Yasodha, she could not speak for her overwhelming relief and joy at getting back her precious son, whom she had thought gone. She hugged him and kissed him without pause, then set him in her lap and bathed him in her tears.

The sun set behind the trees of the western forest. Kaliya's pool was some distance from Vraja, the cowherd settlement and, tired as they were, the gopas decided to spend the night on the banks of the Yamuna. The summer night was clear and warm and great stars shone down upon them and their wealth – the herd, which settled beside them.

It was the height of summer and the jungle and its trees were parched and dry. Around midnight, a forest fire broke out some distance from the sleeping cowherds. Catching and spreading swiftly, it encircled the gopas and their animals. Man and beast awoke in terror; a dark wind bore the searing heat into their sleep.

In panic, the gopas and their women began to hymn Krishna, who was indeed God who had come to the world in a human form by his maya.

'Krishna!' they cried. 'Blessed, almighty Krishna! O Rama! Who has no equal for strength! We are your bhaktas, and this dreadful fire means to consume us.'

'Lord!' they wailed, 'we shall not escape with our lives unless you save us! We are your family, we are your friends. This is our death come for us as this demon fire. We are ready to die, but not to leave you, and our place at your sacred feet.'

Seeing them helpless and distraught, Krishna, master of the universe, puffed up his small and infinite chest, sucked that fire in with a breath, and quaffed it as he might some water! Not a tongue of flame was left, and the gopas and their herd slept peacefully the rest of the night."

PRALAMBA

SRI SUKA SAID, "THE NEXT DAY, THE GOPAS BROUGHT KRISHNA HOME to Vraja in triumphal procession. The cows milled round the Godchild and their herders, while Krishna's little friends sang at his safe return.

The conflagration that broke out the night they slept beside the river was the last. It seemed that torrid summer, whose time it was, stayed away from Vrindavana because Rama and Krishna dwelt on its fringes in the guise of gopa boys. The season that all the embodied dread, transformed itself into a prolonged spring.

In the heart of the most arid months, every river, stream and waterfall gushed as if these were the monsoons. Their flow and cascades drowned the sharp songs of the cicadas. The water that splashed from the falls moistened the trees so they were always in abundant leaf.

Soft winds blew across the surface of river, lake and rill, bearing the scents of blue lotuses, kalaharas and utpalas across Vrindavana. Lush grasses grew plentifully during the zenith of the ferocious season. The gypsy gopas basked in the cool winds and felt no heat, by day or night. The forest fires, which were common during these months, were conspicuous by their absence.

The river and her tributaries overflowed their banks, constantly moistening the sand and mud around their courses, and these wetlands absorbed the sun's most vicious rays, which were otherwise like poison. With the earth damp, the grasses flourished as if this were truly springtime.

The trees were brilliant with flowers in every colour; they were full of sap. Beasts and birds, many of whom migrated, fled or perished during the harsh months, were now happy and the birds full of songs of praise. Peacocks danced at the miracle, while honeybees swarmed among the flowers, filling the jungle with their buzzing. The songs of kokila and sarasa were melodies against the background drone of the bees.

One bright, pleasant day of the subverted summer, Rama and Krishna came deep into Vrindavana again with their gopa friends. They were as colourful as the forest around them in its arrested spring. They sang and played loudly on their flutes, while the cows grazed and gambolled around them.

The boys adorned themselves with freshly sprouted leaves, glittering peacock feathers, garlands of flower buds and flowers, mineral dyes in every hue they could find. Singing and laughing, merry as the lucid day, they danced and wrestled, in abandon.

At times, Krishna would dance by himself, while the others watched entranced, for there was unearthly magic in his dance, or clapped their hands to provide him with a rhythm, or blew tunes on their flutes and horns. Some of the boys, in transport to watch him, sang about how awesome his dance was.

These boys were, after all, Devas born to be Balarama and Krishna's companions, and as supporting actors in a play will eulogise the main protagonists, they sang the divine brothers' praises. Such a sight they were, those small gods, all of them – their hair long, and hanging down to their shoulders, wild as the jungle in which they played.

At times they whirled like dervishes in joy, leaped high into the air like great acrobats or dancers. They competed at all these as well – jumping, skimming flat stones across lakes and streams, running, shouting, throwing large rocks, clapping their hands to see who clapped the loudest, whistling, and whatever else took their fancy.

At times, other boys would dance, while Rama and Krishna played on their flutes or sang for them. The brothers would also cry out encouragement to the dancers. They threw ripe vilva, kumbha and amalaka fruit at each other, so their faces and bodies were stained with their bright juices. Occasionally, as boys will, some young gopas got into brief fistfights.

They tied cloths round their eyes and played blind man's buff, calling out to the boy who was the catcher in bird and animal voices. They played leapfrog, and then pretended to be a king's court, solemn and princely. They swarmed nimbly as monkeys into trees and swung through their branches, chasing one another, laughing and aping monkeys' chatter.

Joking and laughing, their fine young voices ringing against the bright day, they wended their way over hill and through charmed valley. They crossed streams, tripping across stepping stones, came to lakes out of dreams, rippling in the breeze, their lotuses swaying.

Upon the banks of one such lake, a demon crept out of the trees, disguised as a gopa boy, with a kidnapping on his mind. His name was Pralamba and he pretended to be visiting his aunt in Vraja. Krishna took one look at him, and saw what he was, and why he had come. The Blue One began chatting to the Asura, and befriended him, so the demon never suspected he had been discovered.

Then Krishna called all the gopa boys together, and cried that they would form two teams to play some games. Krishna would lead one team, and Balarama would be captain of the other. The boys divided themselves equally among Rama's team and Krishna's.

The games they played were many, and the rule was that the losers must run with the winners on their shoulders. So they played, carried one another upon their shoulders and backs, watched their grazing herd, and wandered through Vrindavana until they arrived near a massive nyagrodha tree, a lone towering banyan called Bhandiraka.

Now Rajan, Balarama's team, with Sridaman, Vrishabha and the others, had won the last game they played, so Krishna's team carried them on their shoulders. Krishna had Sridaman on his shoulders, Bhadrasena carried Vrishabha, and the devil in disguise, Pralamba, carried Balarama.

By now, Pralamba had sensed that Krishna, of whose power he had dark instinct, was invincible. Indeed, he felt that Krishna had seen through his gopa form and the Asura wanted to get away from the Blue God as quickly as he could.

Pralamba decided he would abduct Balarama instead and feed on his flesh. Swift as a wind, the demon ran from the others. But he felt Balarama as heavy as Mount Meru upon his back, and was forced to slow down.

Then he resumed his true, fiend's form, and in a flash, he was a dreadful Asura. His huge body glittered with golden ornaments, his eyes blazed, his brows were arched and shaggy, his jaws agape with rows of fangs glistening, his hair tongues of fire, and crowned with a golden coronet.

Pralamba flew through the air like a cloud with his golden ornaments flashing like streaks of lightning. Balarama rode helplessly upon his back even as the lord of stars, the moon, seems to ride a cloud.

The boy Balarama saw Pralamba transformed and he quailed. Fear touched his heart icily; then, next moment, in a tide, his awareness of who he was himself, his divinity, surged through his mind and heart, dissipating terror. With a growl, he bunched his fist and struck the flying demon on his head – a blow like Indra's Vajra striking a mountain.

Pralamba's skull shattered and blood, brain and bone flew from his ruined head. With a bloodcurdling scream, the demon fell dead on the ground, like a small mountain indeed. The gopa boys gathered round the Asura's enormous corpse and Balarama. 'Jaya!' they cried fervently, standing at a safe distance still. 'Well done!'

Then, they saw Pralamba was really dead and came crowding round Balarama, clapping him on the back, hugging him, whom they had believed taken forever by a devil. They blessed him in their clear young voices, and sang his praises. The heavens opened and a shower of flowers from Devaloka fell over Balarama, while divine voices were also heard singing his glory, and crying, 'Jaya, Jaya!' "

ANOTHER FIRE IN THE FOREST

SRI SUKA SAID, "QUICKLY, THE GOPA BOYS RESUMED THEIR GAME, FOR by the grace of Krishna and Balarama no horror of Pralamba's attack remained with them. Besides, by now they were becoming so used to the extraordinary events that filled their days that only their absence might have surprised them.

Playing and keeping an occasional eye on the herd, carrying one another upon their shoulders when they lost a match of wrestling or long jump, they wandered far into the forest, farther than they had ever come before.

Always eager for the greenest grass, their goats, cows and buffaloes wandered off, and, engrossed in their games, their young herders did not notice they were gone. The animals arrived at Ishikatavi, which was a jungle of tall munja grass.

Unlike in the immediate vicinity of Vraja, here summer held full blazing sway. This forest was parched by the fierce sun beating down, and burnt by frequent fires that broke out spontaneously by day and night.

Having come a long way, the herd was thirsty and could see no water anywhere. The grass was so tall that it grew higher than the cows, and there was fear of the prowling tiger or leopard. Knowing they were lost, terror and exhaustion gripped the animals and they began lowing plaintively. Their young cowherds, though, were far away and did not hear them.

Meanwhile, resting between games, Rama, Krishna and the other gopas saw their herd was missing. They searched for it, soon quite frantically, and called loudly to the cows, but there was no response, nor any sign of the animals. In some shock, the boys began to track the herd by their hoofmarks and the broken blades of grass they left in their wake, where they had grazed.

The boys arrived on the edge of the deep thicket of munja grass. Still, there was no sign of the cows. Krishna climbed a tall tree, and from its highest branches, he roared out the cows' names in a God's voice, like thunder. Now the beasts heard him, and responded deliriously, rushing through the grasses, bellowing in joy.

At this same time, a forest fire broke out in the munja field. A gusting wind its charioteer, it drove at the gopas and their herd; flames tall as trees swept at them from every side. Fear seized animal and young cowherd. The fire that encircled them was terrific past describing. It was, surely, death rushing to devour them.

The boys ran to Rama and Krishna's feet, wailing, 'Great Rama! Almighty Krishna! Save us! Don't your kinsmen, your friends, deserve your protection? Ah, fear tears at us, why must we suffer like this? Knower of all dharma, we seek refuge in you, and you must rescue us.'

Coolly, Krishna said, 'Shut your eyes, and don't be afraid.'

Without hesitation, to a boy they obeyed him. Once more, Krishna, greatest Yogin, emptied his lungs and with a great intake of breath sucked in the conflagration from every side, quenched the last flame.

When the gopa boys opened their eyes, they found themselves and their herd magically back at the foot of the Bhandiraka, the massive banyan of a hundred trunk-thick aerial roots, a wood by itself.

Now, seeing the power of his yogamaya, those boys began to look at Krishna as an immortal and superhuman Being, a God. They all came home together, merry as ever, with the herd raising its usual cloud of dust against the setting sun, and Krishna playing wonderfully on his flute.

They found the gopis waiting breathlessly for them, the cowherd girls and women for whom every moment they were apart from Krishna was like a yuga."

THE SEASONS

SRI SUKA SAID, "WHEN, TALKING ALL TOGETHER, THE BOYS TOLD THEIR elders how Balarama killed Pralamba and how Krishna put out another fire, the gopas and gopis of Vraja also grew more certain than ever that two Gods, or at least two divine beings, had been born among them.

The rains came – the monsoon that gives succour to all the living, man and beast, bird, insect and plant. The sun and moon had rings round them and the sky was full of furious black clouds. Peals of thunder cracked the heavy air, and gashes of lightning obscured the dim lustre of the two luminaries, like the gunas of Prakriti do the splendour of the Brahman.

Just as a great king gathers taxes from his people for months, the sun had collected precious moisture – water, the wealth of the earth – along his rays for eight months. Now, as the king releases the money he has garnered for the people's welfare, came the monsoon.

Mighty winds blew dark lightning-veined clouds into the sky. Like men of great Munificence, they let flow their wealth as torrents of rain, to delight and nurture the people.

When a man sits in long tapasya to achieve an end, his body is emaciated by his rigour. Then, when he has the boon for which he sat in penance, he becomes healthy and ample flesh decks him again. So, too, the Earth shrunk by the heat of the summer now grew fat in the plentiful rain.

Green shoots and leaves pushed their way out everywhere, amply, in a lush riot of life. When night fell, fireflies lit the damp darkness, while stars and planets vanished from the sky – even as, when the kali yuga comes, heretic and atheistic philosophies spread wildly across the earth, while the teachings of the Vedas are lost!

For months, no frog's voice had broken the stillness of the hot summer nights. Now they were a cacophony everywhere, croaking loudly at the thunder above – even as students of the Veda break into loud hymn chanting, in unison, at their acharya's signal!

The streams and rivers, which had been reduced to a trickle during the harsh summer, now overflowed with an extravagance of water. They were unrestrained and excessive as the life, mind and the wealth of a man when prosperity breaks upon him.

The ground was like the encampment of a steaming natural army – fresh grass the legions of footsoldiers, stained here and there with crimson cochineal dye from the insects of that name, like blood. Big colourful mushrooms and toadstools were the parasols of kings.

When the ample rains fill his fields with crops, the farmer is delighted, but when his crop fails in a drought, he is forlorn – for he did not calculate that prosperity is only the Lord's to give.

This monsoon, the Earth, drenched with precious lifegiving water, was beautiful – just as men that worship the Lord Hari begin to resemble him, to attain his divine form.

The oceans, already full, swelled further by the rivers in spate that gushed into them and by the high monsoon winds that stoked their waves. The seas were like the minds of young Rishis – still under passion's wild sway, the waves of desire in their hearts agitated when they come face to face with the objects of the senses.

Only the mountains of the world stood unmoved by the lashing torrents of the sky – like the true and great bhaktas of Vishnu, absorbed in his dhyana, whom not the worst sorrow or calamities can move.

The paths and trails of the earth became quickly undistinguishable, for the tumultuous growth of grass – even as the Vedas are lost in time, because they are not studied well or deeply enough, and ignored by their custodians.

Lightning flashed now within the clouds that were the support of the world, but then deserted them and streaked elsewhere. The lightning was like fickle women, who are unfaithful to even the best and most virtuous of men, when they have no money.

The Brahman, who is beyond the gunas, appears in the phenomenal universe, which is caused by the activity of the three gunas of Prakriti. So, too, a rainbow stretched across the raging sky, with no guna, no bowstring, or apparent support. The sound of thunder was the only attribute, guna, of the firmament.

The moon hid behind black clouds, which were revealed only by his light shining behind them. Soma Deva was like the Atman hidden by the ego, which is manifest only because of the Atman's light.

The peacocks of Vrindavana saw the gathering clouds, and greeted the monsoon with raucous delight. They sang and danced for joy, fans unfurled – even like the grihasta, mired in mundane sorrows, greets the arrival in his home of the Lord Krishna's holy bhaktas.

Came the rains and the trees of the jungle, shrivelled and parched by the summer, drank their fill thirstily through root and branch, and quickly burst into heady flower, and then ample fruit, and were transformed. They, too, were like tapasvins, attenuated by long privation, who become fat and happy again when they gain whatever fruit it was for that they first sat in penance.

The lakes broke their banks as wind and rain lashed them. Yet, they abounded with water birds, which braved the weather, for the fish bred during the monsoon and the fishing was excellent. The birds were like the materially minded, who cling to their homes and possessions, to their attachments and indeed their vile professions. For they are willing to suffer the grief and pain which all these inevitably bring, because their minds are base and addicted to sensual pleasures.

Indra sent down his torrents, his cataracts of the sky, and the embankments and bunds of tanks and reservoirs succumbed – even as the Vedic codes for living do before the sophistries of atheistic philosophers in the kali yuga.

Fetched by great winds, the clouds released their sacred gift of water to all the living – as kings do their wealth, advised by the Rishis and wise men of their courts, at the apposite time.

This was the season when date palms and rose-apple trees bent under the weight of their burdens of fruit, and all Vrindavana was green and lush in an abundance of leaves, flowers and fruit. During the clear days, Krishna, Balarama and their friends brought their cows to graze in the forest.

The animals were fat with the abundance and the richness of the grass they fed on. They walked slowly with full and heavy udders, which oozed milk in love when Krishna merely called their names, and then they ran nimbly to him.

The brothers found all the forest joyful, all its trees, plants and creatures. The flowering trees dripped nectar from exotic blooms, and the streams that flowed down the hills, gushed and chatted with the surfeit of water they bore. Enchanted caves honeycombed those hills, and Krishna, Rama and their friends played their boyish games in them, when it rained, or under the thick canopy of trees.

The gopa boys, with Rama and Krishna, would come to the banks of the Yamuna and sit upon a flat ridge to eat the curd-rice and curries they brought from home. Bulls and calves lay nearby, chewing cud in contentment, while the cows still grazed, their movements slow with the weight of the milk they carried.

Krishna looked at the burgeoning jungle, the river, the trees laden with fruit and flowers, his happy friends and his herd, and great joy came upon him. He blessed the season in his divine heart, and was gratified.

Soon, the sky cleared and monsoon gave way in Vraja to golden autumn. A gentle breeze whispered through the passages of the forest. Lotuses appeared as if by magic on the rivers and streams, the pools and lakes of the jungle, all of which were no longer in spate, but returned to clarity and calm. They were like fallen or seduced Yogis, who turned back to yoga and found their peace again.

Sharata, autumn, cleared the sky of clouds, the undergrowth of its steamy congestion, the ground of slush and mire, the waters of their violence – even as bhakti for Krishna clears the sins of men in the four asramas of life.

Any clouds that appeared in the sky were white, radiant and pure, and rid of their dark burden of water. They were like Rishis who have put the three eshanas, the yearnings of holy men behind them – for wealth, for a son, and for fame. Freed from sin and desire, they were established in peace.

In some places, the mountains let their streams flow, but only at certain times. They were like great and illumined Munis, who impart their teachings like amrita at some times, but are silent at others.

Fish that swam in shallow currents were not aware that the waters were dwindling, just as men immersed in worldly cares do not perceive their lives ebbing away. The fish that dwelt in the shallows began to know the heat of the autumn sun, even as an impoverished, pathetic grihasta, who has heavy responsibilities but little restraint, feels his enervating cares. Like the grihastha, the fish, too, were drawn towards the Lord by their pain.

Slowly, inexorably, the ground yielded her moisture to the sky, and the jungle its verdure, marshes their mire – like the Sannyasi does his sense of self and ego, the feeling of 'I' and 'mine' about his body and his possessions.

When autumn came, the sea grew calm, even as tapasvins stop chanting hymns and fall silent when the mind finds peace. Yogins firmly restrain the flow of their senses and draw them inward, away from the objects of their indulgence – to preserve knowledge, which is otherwise dissipated. So too, farmers augmented the bunds around their fields again, to keep the water that remained on the ground inside their fields.

The autumn moon was balm to the pain of men and every creature after the fiery heat of the summer sun – even as revelation of the Atman dissolves the sorrows caused by identifying one's self with the body. Or as Krishna comes to allay the pain of the women of Vraja at being apart from him.

Clear skies, not a cloud in them, shone with stars pulsing down through the autumn nights – just as the mind ruled by the pure sattva guna naturally fathoms the meaning of the Sabdabrahman, the Vedas.

The full moon in the sky, with the stars around him, was like Krishna himself among his Vrishni clansmen, upon the Earth. Tender breezes, which blew from Vrindavana, caressed the gopas and calmed them after the heat of the day's sun. But the breeze did not cool the gopis, whose hearts Krishna had stolen, and they felt the pangs of being apart from him, and embraced him in their fantasies.

Autumn was the season of love, the time for mating. Just as worshipping the Lord certainly brings its fruit to the devotee, the women, full of desire, helplessly sought out their men and became pregnant. Cows, deer, every animal and bird went to rut and conceived.

At dawn, all the lotuses unfurled their petals to the rising sun. But the moon lotuses remained shut – like frightened criminals, who are the only exceptions in being unhappy among his otherwise joyful subjects, at the investiture of a king.

The Earth was aglow, and the cornfields radiant – particularly because of the two rays of light born in the world, the amsas of the Lord Vishnu. In city and village, new corn was offered at Vedic yagnas, and colourful festivals and all sorts of celebrations gladdened the senses and the mind.

Merchant, Sage, king and snataka student, committed for life to study and bachelorhood, who had spent the days of the rains indoors, now emerged into the crisp bright days to perform their ordained dharma. They were like Siddhas – masters of yoga and mantras – who are captive in their mortal bodies for the span of their incarnate lives, but then attain their celestial bodies."

THE SONG OF THE GOPIS

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "DEEP INTO FASCINATING VRINDAVANA, ITS streams and lakes crystalline with autumn, swept by breezes piquant with the scent of lotuses, came Krishna, with the gopas and the herd.

With Balarama and their friends, he followed the grazing herd into the heart of secret zones of the jungle. They came to the banks of lakes out of dreams, to hills that suddenly thrust themselves out of the trees, to unknown rivers that sparkled across their path. The trees were livid with flowers, and their branches thronged with birds, whose songs filled the green and golden air, as did the hum of swarms of honey-drunk bees. As they went, Krishna played on his flute – songs of the universe, of the stars.

They were also songs of enticement. When the gopis of Vraja heard them from afar, they clearly sensed the erotic intent in the magical notes. Some of them sung softly to their friends in husky voices about the strength and beauty of blue Krishna, who by now was no more a boy but a youth upon the edge of manhood.

No sooner did they begin these songs to the tune of the faraway blatant flute, O Raja, than they stopped breathless, speechless, overcome by sudden absolute lust.

Still, some of them sang on enraptured:

'Barhaaleedam Naṭavaruvapuh Kanayoh Karnikaaram Bibhrad Vaasah Kanakakapisham Vaijayantim cha Maalaam;

Randhraan Venoradhayasudhayah Purayan Gopavrindaivrindaaranyam Svapadaramanm Pravishad Gitakirtih.

Beautiful as a master dancer, wearing a crown of peacock feathers, and earrings of karnikaara flowers, clad in a golden yellow robe, with a vaijayanti garland of five wildflowers round this neck, filling the holes of his flute with nectar from his lips, Krishna walks in Vrindavana with the gopas singing his praises in classical ragas.'

The women of Vraja heard his song and there was not one among them who did not make him her lover in her mind, embracing him ardently. And as they did, they sang of him again.

'There is no higher gift for those that have eyes to see, indeed there is no higher bliss than this sight!'

'Only they who have drunk the sight of Nanda's sons' charming faces, as they play on their flutes in the forest, glancing sidelong and lovingly at their cows and their friends, have tasted the sweetest wine of life.'

'Wearing blue and yellow clothes, woven with tender mango leaves, tufts of peacock feathers, flowers in their hair, blue lotuses around their necks, singing and dancing in abandon with the other young gopas, Rama and Krishna are completely beautiful. They are like the greatest actors ever to bestride the stage of this Earth.'

'Ah Gopis, what punya must that flute have done, to be inundated by the amrita that flows from Damodara's lips, the honey which properly belongs to us! Even the Devi Lakshmi has to make do with leftover amrita, after that flute has drunk its fill, and yet drinks on.

The rivers, which nurtured the bamboo, of which that flute is made, break out in a rash of lotuses, as if horripilating in ecstasy. The bamboo clumps themselves well with dew, as if shedding tears in joy that such a great bhakta of the Lord was born into their clan!'

'Sisters, bearing the grace of Krishna's footmarks, Vrindavana makes this Bhumi more beautiful than Swarga. All the beasts in the mountains and their valleys stand stock still, to watch the peacocks dancing ritually, intoxicated by the song of his flute. They felt that music like the music of the spheres, like rumbling clouds, in every fibre of their bodies and souls.

Gentle does of the forest, though not blessed with intellects, heard the song and came to offer him their worship. They came with their mates, the black antelopes, and adored Nanda's divine son with their most loving glances out of their great eyes – picturesque and fabulous as he was, wearing yellow and every flower in the forest.'

'Alas, that our husbands are too petty to stand it, if we were to do the same!'

'Above, Apsaras who ranged the sky in their subtle vimanas saw Krishna, heard his flute songs, which none but he can play, and they stopped still in a shock of desire. Their unworldly garments slipped from their breasts, and the chaplets of flowers they wore in their hair fell down to the earth.'

'Their ears erect and serving as goblets, the cows drank deeply of his ambrosial song, flowing from his lips, his breath. Calves stood rapt, unmoving; they held their mouthfulls of milk from their mothers' oozing teats, not swallowing. With their great soft eyes their hugged Govinda Krishna and tears of joy streamed down their long faces.'

'Ah, miracles upon miracles! O my mother, surely every bird in Vridavana is a sage. For, even as Rishis who want a vision of Krishna follow the myriad branches of the Veda, performing their dharma, heedless of its fruit, the birds of the forest perched in the trees. They sat upon many branches, all with new leaves, without stirring, gazing with unwinking eyes at Krishna. They did not allow flower or fruit to obstruct their view of the Avatara. In perfect stillness and silence they sat, oblivious to the living jungle around them, oblivious to the world, absorbed in just the sight of him and in his fantastic flute song.

Truly, they are just like Munis who lose themselves in singing Krishna's praises, or in his transcendent music.'

'A cloud passing in the sky peered down to hear Krishna song, and saw the Blue One, Balarama and the gopas. The cloud followed them, arrested by Krishna's song. It saw them afflicted by the noonday sun and covered them like a great parasol above – from the surging affection it felt for Krishna.'

'Happy and blessed are the Pulinda tribal women of the forest! They see his saffron footprints in the grass and passion flares up in their wild hearts. Ah, they gratify themselves by rubbing their faces and their dark breasts against those saffron traces of his blue feet – the powder that fell from him during his amorous games with Radha. Or fell from her breasts.'

'Sweet gopis, surely Govardhana is among his greatest bhaktas. For isn't the mountain in rapture from the touch of Krishna and Rama's feet? And he honours them daily, with their herd and their friends, giving them clear water, his finest grass, sugarcane, roots, fruit and tubers to eat, and his caves for them to explore and seek shelter.'

'Ah my friends, Krishna and Rama range the forest carrying ropes with which to tie the hind-legs of cows, while milking them, or for hauling them in when some run wild. How wonderful it is that the exquisite flute songs make mobile creatures grow still in absorption and rooted trees to sway and tremble.'

So the gopis imagined Krishna in the forest, when they heard the strains of his flute from afar, and they were entirely absorbed in the thought of Rama and him."

THE GOPIS' CLOTHES

SRI SUKA SAID, "CAME MARGASIRSHA, THE FIRST MONTH OF THE SEASON known as Hemanta, mid autumn, of which the other, second, month is Pausa. The gopi maidens kept their yearly vow in the name of the Goddess Katyayani – they ate only the purest sattvik food, which could also be offered in the sacrificial fire.

Rajan, the young women would go to the Yamuna at dawn to bathe. On the bank of the river, they fashioned an image of the Devi from sand, and worshipped her with sandalwood paste, garlands of fragrant flowers, lighting incense and waving lamps before the sand idol. They offered Katyayani tender leaves, fruit, unbroken rice.

These virgins chanted the Katyayani mantra:

'*Katyayani Mahamaaye Mahayoginyadheeshwari; Nandagoputsam Devi Patim Mey Kuru Te Namah!*

Katyayani, great Maya, great Yogini, final sovereign of the universe. I beg you, give me Nanda Gopa's son to be my husband!' Each gopi prayed thus to the Goddess.

Thus, the young gopi maidens kept their vow for a month, praying to the Goddess Bhadrakali that Nanda's son become their husband.

They would wake at crack of dawn and call one another out. Holding hands, they came to the Yamuna in a throng, singing loudly about Krishna – to bathe as first light of day broke over the world.

The final day of the vow was a paurnima, the day of the full moon. As usual, the young women arrived at the Yamuna, and leaving their clothes on the shore, plunged naked into the swift current. They swam about, laughing and shrieking at the bite of the night-chilled water. Their minds were fixed, like a single mind arrested by a single thought, upon Krishna. Again, they sang beautifully about him. They saw the deep blue hue of the Yamuna, and thought of Krishna's complexion; they imagined he was the dark water, embracing each of them intimately.

Of course, by now Krishna knew for what they came to pray. That morning he came stealthily with his friends to the place in the river where the gopis bathed. He, the master of all masters of yoga, came to grant the women their hearts' desire, the fruit of their vow of a month.

When the gopis were absorbed in their games in the water, Krishna gathered all their clothes and shinned into a kadamba tree overhanging the water. Now he called down to the naked cowgirls, his voice full of laughter. The other boys, at the foot of the tree, were in splits.

'My lovely ones,' he called down, flagrantly, 'I see that you are tired from keeping such a long vrata, so I will not trifle with you. I tell you earnestly, come one by one or all together and take your clothes from me!

These gopa boys are my friends and they know that I have never yet told a lie. Ah, my pretty-waisted gopis, come one at a time and get your clothes from me.'

Though he spoke jokingly, there was little doubt from his tone what he intended. The girls blushed; they trembled to realise what he was saying. Yet they could not be brazen and remained in neck-deep water, shivering.

They said to him on the tree, 'Ah, Krishna, what are you asking? This is not worthy of our chieftain Nanda's son, whom Vraja adores, whose praises we all sing. Sweet Krishna, give back our clothes, we beg you. Don't you see us shivering in the cold?'

The older gopis said, 'Beautiful blue one, we are your slaves, we will do anything you ask. But you are a knower of dharma, so give us back our clothes or we will have to tell Nanda Gopa what you did.'

He was not perturbed. With no hesitation, he said, 'If you are my slaves, then come and fetch your clothes from me. Be sure to come smiling, or I will not give them back. And what will Nanda do to me?'

Nothing else for it, the gopis came shivering out of the river. They came covering their pubises with their hands, blue with the cold. He saw them in their enchanting nakedness, and draped the clothes over his shoulder. He said, grinning down at the virgin girls, 'Bathing naked! Don't you know it is a sin against the Gods to bathe naked in a river, after keeping a vrata? There is only one expiation for you. Fold your hands above your heads and prostrate yourselves on the ground, and I will give you your clothes.'

They heard this command, now full of not just erotic but spiritual import – from that Mahatman Krishna. Still shy, and also excited past reason, the girls raised one hand above their heads, keeping the other between their legs, covering their sex. They bowed low to him.

Krishna said gravely, 'They who know the Vedas will tell you, gopis, that anyone who worships the Lord Achyuta with just one hand, must be punished by having his other hand cut off.

Always worship God by folding both your hands together, and you also would please me better if you did that.'

Uncanny gravity was upon the young girls, a current of something far deeper than their nakedness and Krishna's mocking words. They had heard from him, in his supremely ambiguous tone, that it was a sin to bathe naked in the river after keeping a vrata. Now they heard the Lord must never be saluted with a single hand – this was a worse sin still. The gopis uncovered themselves entirely, even as souls do while surrendering to God. They folded both hands above their heads, and bowed to him, who is the fruit of every religious observance, who washes every sin.

Devaki's son, the merry and merciful Krishna, looked at them now, bowing humbly and quite naked to him, and he was satisfied. He gave them back their clothes.

He had deceived them by saying it was against the law of their vow to bathe naked in the river. He robbed them of their shame by making them come out naked from the water. He mocked them by having them accept his ridicule as the solemn truth. He treated them like puppets, making them fold their hands above their heads and prostrate before him. Yet, not one of them felt in the least resentful – all they felt was the excitement of having been naked before him, of being with him now, the bliss of communion.

The gopis clothed themselves, but they lingered on in Krishna's presence, with shy glances at him.

He knew the reason for which they had taken the Katyayani vrata – to touch his feet, so to speak! The Lord Damodara spoke, smilingly, to the cowherd girls.

'I know the reason for your keeping the Katyayani vrata, and you will all have what your hearts want. There is no sin in what you desire, gopis, and your yearning for me, your love, will save you from being born again into this world of samsara – for a seed once cooked does not sprout again!'

His smile grew now, 'Go back to Vraja, gopis, for your vow is over and it has borne fruit. You will be with me, dance with me, and make love with me in Vrindavana, soon – during these very nights of autumn. That was what your vrata was for, wasn't it?'

As in a dream, their hearts still full of him, his beauty, his lotus-like feet, the gopis obeyed. They went back, though most reluctantly, to Vraja.

One day in summer, glorious Krishna, Devaki's son, had ranged far from Vrindavana, with Balarama and the other gopas, and, of course, the herd. Krishna saw how the trees all round spread their branches over them, like parasols alive, to protect them from the noonday sun.

He turned to his friends, 'Stoka-Krishna, Amshu, Sridaman, Subalarjuna, O mighty Visalarishabha! O Devaprastha, Varuthapa – look at these noble beings that live only to be of help to their fellow creatures! They endure gale and storm, heat and frost, just to shield us from the vagaries of the seasons.

There is no more blessed birth in this world than of a tree. For they give nurture to every creature, and in every way. None that come to them for shelter or sustenance is sent away disappointed. They are like the good men of the world who never turn away the needy that approach them, empty-handed.

Trees give their all to satisfy the wants of other creatures: birds, beasts and men. They give us their leaves, flowers, fruit, their shade, roots, bark, their wood, their sweet sap, which is like their blood, their ashes, and their most tender green shoots. So, too, my friends, a man's life in this world has meaning and is fruitful in so far as he uses, even sacrifices, his energy, his wealth, his intelligence and his speech to help his fellow men.'

Wistfully, lovingly, Krishna spoke of the trees, stroking the bark of this one and the other, as he and the gopas wandered through shady groves, where branches bent low over them with the weight of clusters of young leaves, buds and flowers in bloom, and some with shining fruit. O King, they brought their herd to the clear, cool, and health-giving waters of the Yamuna, and youth and cow drank their fill of her sweet flow.

Again, they followed the herd, which grazed where it pleased, and the gopas grew tired and hungry. Then they spoke to Rama and Krishna."

MOKSHA FOR THE BRAHMANA WIVES

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, “SAID THE HUNGRY GOPA BOYS, ‘BALARAMA, O Rama of exceptional strength, O Krishna, scourge of the evil, we are terribly hungry. We beg you, feed us somehow.’

Krishna knew in his sacred heart about some brahmana women who lived nearby and were his bhaktas. He wanted to bless them, and said to his gopa companions, ‘You know of the brahmana sacrificers in the yonder yagnashala. They recite the Vedas, and they are performing the yagna called Angirasa. They do not begin to understand the inner meaning of the Veda, but only want to go briefly enough to Devaloka when they die.

Go to them, and say that Balarama and Krishna sent you. Tell them, gopas, to give you some rice for us and for yourselves.’

The gopas went to the yagnashala of the brahmanas, folded their hands reverentially, and prostrated on the ground before the sacrificers, lying straight and stiff as staffs. The petitioned the brahmanas, ‘O gods on earth, we beg you, listen to us. We are gopa cowherds, and friends and servants of Lord Krishna. His brother Balarama and he sent us here. May God bless you, O Brahmanas!

Krishna and Rama are not far from here, minding the herd. They are hungry, brahmanas, and ask you to give them some food. O greatest knowers of dharma, if you know who they are and believe in them, give us some of the rice you have cooked for your yagna.

Most excellent ones, you know the shastras say there is no sin in receiving food and drink from a sacrificer – as long as the sacrifice does not involve the slaughter of an animal or the wine of a sautramani yagna.'

But these brahmanas were petty men, mere ritualists intent on achieving ephemeral Devaloka and its transient pleasures, when they died. Yet they believed themselves to be and behaved like wise elders, and were vainglorious too. They clearly heard what Krishna asked them for through his gopa friends, but they pretended not to hear and ignored the youths. They had no inkling that if they chose the simple path of bhakti for themselves – rather than the tortuous rituals they were performing for such a mean gain – they might have eternal salvation, moksha.

The foolish brahmanas identified themselves with their bodies, and being perverse and low-minded, they saw Krishna, the incarnate Brahman, the Lord Vishnu himself, the transcendent One, as just another mortal man. They did not know that he was all the time and place where every sacrifice is undertaken; he is the oblations, the mantras, the rituals, and the priests themselves. He alone is the sacred fire, the Gods invoked, the sacrificer, the act of the sacrifice, and the punya that accrues from its performance.

They did not reply to what the gopas had said, and having neither a 'yes' or a 'no' from them, the youths grew dispirited. They returned to Balarama and Krishna and told them what had happened.

Krishna burst out laughing. Wanting to teach his friends the ways of the world, and especially persistence in the face of failure, he said, 'Go to the wives of the brahmanas and tell them that Rama and I have come to this place. They are loving, and live in me always, even if their bodies are with their husbands. They will give you all the food you want.'

Now the gopa boys went to the apartment where the brahmana yajakas' wives sat. They saw the women wearing their finest clothes, and decked in golden ornaments. With folded hands, the gopas bowed to the chaste women, and said, 'We salute you, noble brahmana ladies! We ask you to hear what we have come to say. Krishna has arrived not far from here, and he sent us to you.

Balarama, Krishna and we ourselves followed our grazing herd far from Vraja. Krishna and Rama are hungry, as are we. We ask you to serve us food.'

Those brahmana women, whose hearts had long ago been given to Krishna when they heard of his astonishing deeds since he was an infant, were aflutter to hear that he was nearby. For so long they had been just dying to catch a glimpse of him.

Like rivers flow to the ocean, they ran to him, who owned their souls, the one they loved, to Krishna, the Lord. They took large vessels with them, brimful with the most delicious food of four kinds – bhakshya, which is easily swallowed, bhijya that has to be chewed, lehya that is licked, and coshya, which is sucked.

Their brothers and fathers, their husbands and other kinsmen forbade them to go, but they paid these brahmanas no mind. They had listened to the divine legends of Krishna for so long, and now no one would prevent them from seeing him, or taking him the food for which he had asked.

In a grove of asoka trees, full of tender new foliage, on the very banks of the Yamuna, the brahmana wives had their first stunning sight of Krishna, ambling leisurely with his brother, and the other gopas. He was dark blue, and wore a brilliant yellow, pitambara, robe, secured at his waist with a golden girdle.

Such a sight! He was like some great actor or dancer, who wore a garland of wildflowers, peacock feathers, soft green leaves and shoots, his limbs and face painted with livid mineral dyes. He had one hand on the shoulders of a companion, and casually dangled a long-stemmed lotus in the other. He wore blue lilies in his ears, and his hair hung in locks over his brow, around his smiling, radiant face, and down to his shoulders.

For how long they had heard about him, and how splendid he was. They had felt such soft joy just with that. Now they saw him before their eyes, and his beauty and his radiance exceeded their wildest expectations. Through their eyes, they drew him avidly into the chambers of their hearts. They stood transfixed, gazing, embraced him there, in spirit, and immediately felt all pain and sorrow leave them – they felt the total relief the ego finds when united with praajna, the witness of the deepest state of sleep.

Krishna saw perfect devotion in them; he saw them as seekers of the highest sort. He knew they had come to him abandoning every other desire, disobeying their men. Krishna, ultimate witness of every individual witness, every jiva, called to them with a smile.

'Wise and most blessed women, be welcome! Come and sit with us in comfort. Tell us what we may do for you. Ah, how worthy you are, that you have come like this to see us. Souls of discernment, who grasp the real aim of their lives and where their truest interest lies, spend their time in bhakti for me, devotion with no other end but itself. For I am their deepest Self.

Nothing can be more precious than one's Atman, which alone makes a man love his life, prana, intellect, mind, body, wife, children, wealth, and everything else that he does.

Now you have seen me and fulfilled a longstanding ambition, your life's ambition. Now go back to the yagnashala, where your husbands, the brahmanas, are waiting for you to complete their sacrifice. For their very condition of being grihastas depends upon your presence at their side.'

The women said, 'Ubiquitous One! We have flown to you in the face of our kinsmen's wishes, disobeying their explicit command. Don't be so cruel to us. We have come to wear the tulasi leaves that fall from your feet in our hair. You have promised to give sanctuary to bhaktas that come to you in surrender, abandoning everything else. Keep your word, Lord.

Besides, even if we do go back, none of our husbands, fathers, brothers, sons or anyone will keep us because we have offended them by coming to you against their wishes. We have offered ourselves to you, bringing our bodies, minds and souls to your sacred feet. No, Krishna, we will have no other life now, except one of serving you!'

Krishna said, 'No husband, father, brother, son or anyone in the world will blame you for coming to me as you have. Even the Devas shall only sing your praises. You do not need physical contact or nearness to evolve spiritually and find the eternal love of the spirit. Devote your hearts to me, and I swear you will attain me very quickly. So return to your homes, I am always with you.'

Convinced by him, the brahmana wives went back to the yagnashala, the hall of their husbands' sacrifice. Their menfolk showed them no displeasure, but completed their yagna with their wives' help.

There was one woman whom her husband had forcibly prevented from going to Krishna with the others. She meditated most fervently upon him, clasped him in her heart in the form she imagined from the stories she had heard about him. Before anyone else, she attained union with the Lord, and leaving her body, which was only a manifestation of her karma of lives gone by, she found moksha.

When the women had gone back, Krishna divided the rice of four kinds, which the brahmana wives had brought, among the gopa youths. He also ate with them.

So, the Lord, who had assumed a human body for his divine sport, was a young cowherd in Vrindavana and Vraja. He brought untold joy to the cows, the gopas and gopis, with his beautiful form, his fascinating speech, and his godly deeds.

Their sacrifice complete, the brahmanas were overcome by profound guilt and repentance. They saw what a grievous sin they committed by ignoring the request for food, which came from none other than the Lord himself, who had taken human forms.

They saw their wives filled with unearthly bhakti of the highest kind for Krishna, and themselves hollow and without it, and they castigated themselves: 'Of what use is it our being born brahmanas and having received the triune sacrament? In vain is our learning, our austerity, our erudition in the Shastras, and our acumen at every known ritual.

For having all these, we do not have bhakti for the Lord himself, who is the goal of everything that we possess! God's maya deludes even master Yogis. We are brahmanas, and meant to be gurus to the world, but we do not know what is good for ourselves.

And witness the devotion of our women, their absolute bhakti for Krishna, who is the Jagadguru, the teacher of the world. With this adoration, they so easily severed the knots of attachment that bind jivas to their home.

Our women are not dvijas, not twice-born like us. They have not had upanayanams done for them, or been invested with the sacred thread. They have not had tutelage in a Guru's house. They have never been taught or performed ceremonies of purification. They have no access to the rituals of the Veda.

Yet, they have such profound bhakti for Krishna the Enlightener, who dispels avidya, who is the master of all Yogis. Alas, with all our religious training, initiation, and our knowledge of sacramental rites, we lack our women's faith.

How marvellous it is that the Lord himself, the final goal and the only support of all holy men, chose to send us a reminder, and indeed a warning, through the gopas. For the truth is that we have forgotten our real purpose, and have sunk into the smugness of domestic life.

Why else would he, who is perfectly satisfied in himself, who is the Lord, who bestows moksha, come to us, worthless, insignificant creatures, begging for food? Why, the Devi Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth, beauty and all that is auspicious, forsook every other Deva, and even her own proverbial inconstancy, to seek permanent refuge in him. It would be a surprise indeed if he had to beg some rice from us! No, the only reason was to remind us how shallow we have become.

He is all the yagna – its time and place, the offerings, the mantra, the tantra, the vaidik priests, the sacred fire, the gods, the yajaka, the sacrifice and its fruit. He is Mahavishnu, master of Yogis, born into the clan of the Yadavas. All this we have heard, but being dim-witted, we did not believe it or understand who he is.

Yet, we are fortunate to have wives as excellent as ours are; for, by their bhakti they have shown us the true way, the way of devotion to Hari. We salute you, O Krishna, unfading lustre of consciousness, soul of every divine quality, bound by whose maya, we wander these dark byways of karma.

May you, Lord, the origin and master of maya, forgive us our sin, for it is your own delusion that darkens our minds so we did not know who you truly are!'

Yet, though they spoke these words aloud and repented, the brahmanas did not dare go out to meet Krishna and Rama because they were terrified of Kamsa."

THE INDRA YAGNA

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONCE, WHILE LIVING IN VRINDAVANA WITH HIS BROTHER Balarama, Krishna saw the gopas making eager preparations to perform a sacrifice to Indra.

Knowing, but feigning ignorance, Krishna came to the cowherds and asked Nanda innocently, 'Father, why are you all so excited? Is it because of a yagna, and what do you hope to gain from the sacrifice? Which God do you mean to worship? Who will perform the yagna?

I am keen to know everything, so I beg you, tell me all, O my father. Rishis, who see the Atman everywhere, in all things, keep no secrets. They see the same soul in everyone and make no distinction between themselves and anyone else. They make no difference between a friend, an enemy, or someone who is neither, but indifferent. Indeed, if ever they do discriminate, they might avoid an enemy or a stranger, but never a friend. For, the friend is one's own self, and you can confide in him.

In this world, some men undertake Vedic sacrifices, knowing exactly what they are about. Others, alas, perform them blindly, never realising what it is they do. The yagna of the first kind of sacrificer is surely more successful than of the second.

So, tell me, O Nanda, are you performing this yagna with full knowledge of what you do, as found in the Shastras, or merely because it is an ancient custom of the land? Tell me clearly, father, I want to know.'

Nanda replied, 'Indra is lord of the rain; he is master of the clouds, which bring the rains in which we delight, the monsoon that we need.

My son, all the people, and ourselves too, worship Indra with what grows from the rains he brings. We sacrifice the very things to him that grow from the rain.

For the three ends of life, dharma, artha and moksha, we depend on rain. A man might labour in his field all year, but Indra makes his work fruitful by blessing it with rain. If there is no rain, all our labour becomes barren.

So, he that does not keep the tradition of sacrificing to Indra, which has come down from the dawn of time, is inevitably ruined – be it from greed, miserliness, fear or enmity that he fails in his obligation.'

Other gopas in Vraja spoke similarly for the Indra yagna, and when he had heard them out, Krishna said something that enraged Indra, lord of the clouds.

Krishna said, 'All the living are born according to their karma, and by karma alone do they die as well. Karma gives them their pleasures and pain, their fear and prosperity. If you say that there is an Ishwara who bestows the fruit of their karma upon mortals, then that God can do so just only according to the nature of the karma, in exact measure. No Ishwara can bestow any boon or blessing upon a man who does not perform karma.

So, to beings who are entirely subject to their own karma, of what use is an Indra who cannot sever the knot of the punya and paapa of past lives?

Every man is a slave to the karma of his past, and its effects; he cannot transcend these. Mortal men, the Asuras and the Devas themselves are ruled by their natures, which result only from their karma. The jiva finds and abandons noble and base births and bodies according to its karma. Who his friend is, who his enemy, his acquaintance, who is indifferent to him, his teacher, his God – all this is karma, nothing else.

So, all that a man must keep is the dharma that is ordained for him by his birth and his nature, which results from his karma, which verily is Narayana. That is the only real worship. The work by which a man may live happily is his God.

When a man has his livelihood from one God but offers worship to another, he is like an unfaithful woman, supported by her husband but receiving a lover. Never will she or her family prosper.

A brahmana must observe the dharma of his birth – learning and teaching the Vedas. A kshatriya protects the land into which he is born and its people; a vaishya lives by trade, or vaarta; and the sudra by serving the twice-born.

Of four kinds is vaarta – farming, commerce, raising cattle, and usury; and money-lending, too. Of these, ours has always been the way of herding cows.

The three gunas of Prakriti – sattva, rajas, and tamas – are responsible for the growth, creation, and destruction of the universe. Rajas brings male and female together, and from their mating comes the world of endless variety, all the species.

The rajas in nature brings the rain, which provides living creatures with whatever they need. What does Indra have to do with it?

Besides, we are gypsies and nomads. We have no countries, kingdoms, cities, towns or villages that we build or call our own. We are a forest people, and we live in the wilderness, in jungles and upon mountains.

I say you should perform the yagna to honour not Indra, but our herd, our brahmanas and this great Mount Govardhana. You can perform the sacrifice with the very materials you have collected to worship Indra.

As you intended, make many kinds of payasa, boiled lentils and pulse dishes, every kind of sweet and cake, and collect all the milk you can from all our cows. Let the best brahmanas, who know the Veda deeply, perform the agnihotra; and feed them every manner of delicacy, as well as giving the finest milch cows.

Distribute food to every other caste, too, down to the chandalas, as they deserve. Feed animals and the dogs of Vraja. Let the cows be given all the grass they can eat, and then offer the food and havis from your yagna as bali to Mount Govardhana.

Eat yourselves, then bathe and anoint your skin with fragrant sandalwood paste. Put on your finest clothes and ornaments, and walk in pradakshina round the cows, the brahmanas, and the mountain.

This, O my father, is what I think you should do. For it will please the cows, the holy men, and the sacred mountain, replete with the Brahman. It will also please me,' said Krishna, with a smile.

Krishna, who was Kaalaatman, the Spirit of Cosmic Time, said all this because he wanted to humble Indra. Nanda and the other gopas agreed without hesitation, crying, 'Good! So be it.'

They performed the yagna exactly as Krishna asked them to. They sanctified the very offerings they had gathered for their Indra yagna with the svastyanana mantras, which ward off evil. They offered them to the brahmanas and the mountain. They fed their cows with piles of the lushest grass.

The gopi women were beautifully dressed and adorned, and rode in their bright carts drawn by the heftiest bullocks, singing Krishna's praises. With the brahmanas pronouncing benedictions, and their herd going before them, the gopas circumambulated around great Govardhana, always keeping the mountain to their right side.

They offered Govardhana a mountainous quantity of food, and to kindle faith in the gopas' hearts, Krishna assumed an immense form and ate it all, announcing that he – that form – was the mountain! The gopas cried out for wonder, for they thought that Govardhana had indeed manifested himself.

Krishna, the dark gopa youth standing at their side, said, 'A miracle! The mountain manifested itself to bless us. Govardhana can assume any form he chooses. He comes as predators to kill the hunting folk that insult him. For our cattle and ourselves, let us prostrate to the mountain, and pray to him!'

Krishna prostrated on the ground in sashtanga namaskara to Govardhana, and the other gopas promptly followed him. So it was, that the gypsy cowherds performed their yagna not to Indra, but to their herd, the brahmanas and to Mount Govardhana.

Then they returned to Vraja, and contentment was upon them."

A MOUNTAIN LIFTED

SRI SUKA SAID, "RAJAN, WHEN INDRA SAW HIS SACRIFICE DIVERTED BY Krishna, he was furious with Nanda's gopas. The Deva king had come to think of himself as supreme lord of heaven and earth.

Beside himself with anger, he summoned the cloud hosts of the apocalypse – the Samvartaka that fetches the Pralaya, the Deluge in which the universe is drowned. Indra cried to his awesome and final stormtroop, 'The arrogance of these forest-dwellers, these cowherds! Their prosperity has gone to their heads. They depend on a mere mortal boy, this Krishna, and they dare insult the Gods.

They abandon the path of the self, the way of dhyana, and hope to cross the ocean of samsara on the skiffs of mere rituals. They dare seek enmity with the immortal Devas, counting on Krishna, a human and a fool, a callow boy who spouts platitudes and pretends to be a deep scholar, a braggart.

Go, my thunderheads of the Pralaya, humble these gypsies – drown their miserable herd in a storm such as they have never seen! Go, go, and I will follow on Airavata, bringing the Maruts with me, to blast their Vraja with gale winds, to ruin Nanda and his paltry tribe.'

Unleashed by Indra, the Samvartaka descended on Nanda's Gokula with a savage cataract of rain. Thunder and lightning rent the grim grey air, while batteries of hailstones crashed down on the cowherd settlements, the rhythms of some cosmic drummer. Gusts of wind, each as forceful as a tornado, blasted at Vrindavana and Vraja.

The rain now fell in torrents thick as pillars, and the earth was covered by water; high land and low were quickly indistinguishable. In whom would the cows, the gopas and gopis – trembling in the storm's ferocity, drenched to the bone – seek sanctuary? Only in Krishna.

The harried herd came, lowing, and laid their heads at his feet. The terrified cowherds set up a loud bewailing, 'Krishna, mighty Krishna, you must save us from Indra's wrath, we depend on you!'

This was certainly Indra's doing – the furious storm and the havoc it brought to Gokula. Krishna knew, 'Deprived of his yagna, arrogant Indra thinks that he will destroy our herd and ourselves.

But I will use my mystic powers, for I have come to humble those that imagine they are the masters of the Earth, whose hearts are full of darkness and vanity, and who delude themselves about their power and position.

Immortals who are truly holy never think of themselves as being the lords of men or creatures. But I must humble Indra, remove some of his pride. Surely it will benefit his spirit.

The gopas now seek refuge in me, and refuge they will find. For that, too, is my dharma, my mission in this world – to protect those that come to me for protection.'

In a flash, Krishna lifted the Mountain Govardhana, and growing himself, held it aloft as if it were light as a mushroom. Then he called to the gopas, 'Father, Mother Yasodha, all of you people of Vraja, bring your cows and shelter here from Indra's storm.'

He laughed to see their awestruck expressions, 'Don't be afraid, the mountain will not fall on your heads! And not rain or wind will touch you here. This is I, Krishna, who say this to you. I offer you sanctuary, come.'

Strange calm upon their hearts, the gopas loaded their carts with all their worldly goods, which Indra sought to ruin. Bringing their children and their herds with them, they came, one by one, into the hollow in the earth where Govardhana's roots had plunged.

Seven days, without let, Indra's storm raged all around them. But the gopas remained beneath the mountain, and Krishna held it above them, never moving, and no sip of water or morsel of food passed his lips.

Indra raged on high, to no avail, and he, the Deva king, was awestruck by Krishna's power. Defeated, his arrogance left him, and he abandoned his haughty plan to devastate Gokula. The master of thunderheads withdrew the clouds of the Pralaya, and flew home to Devaloka.

In moments, the rain stopped and the sky was clear. The sun shone out again of speckless azure depths, from where it seemed to have vanished forever. The gale winds fell still.

Krishna, who lifted Govardhana, said to the gopas, 'Come out now, my people. Bring your women and your possessions. Bring your children and your cows, for there is nothing left to fear. Wind and rain have abated, and the water upon the ground flows but in friendly streams.'

The gopa families emerged from the vast hollow under the mountain – women, children and the aged, with their belongings and their cows. The gopa men came out last. While they all watched, hardly believing their eyes yet, Krishna softly set the massive mountain down again. He was God; this was less than child's play to him.

Now, the gypsy cowherds and their women thronged round the Avatara. They hugged him again and again; they laughed and wept for sheer incredulous joy. They sprinkled drops of fresh curd over him. They sprinkled sacred water and auspicious rice grains on him, chanting loud blessings all the while.

Overwhelmed, bursting with love, Yasodha, Rohini, Nanda and his mighty brother Balarama embraced Krishna fervently, and blessed him.

O Parikshit, in the firmament, Deva and Sadhya, Siddha, Gandharva and Charana rejoiced, and sent down a rain of flowers. Conches blew and drums sounded, while the greatest Gandharva minstrels, like Tumburu, sang.

Rajan, with the adoring gopis around him, Krishna entered Gokula, Balarama close by his side. The gopis came singing and dancing, drunk with love for him, beside themselves for what they had seen, for what they felt."

THEY DECLARE HE IS GOD

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "ONE DAY, THE GOPAS MET TOGETHER. THEY had not yet acknowledged who Krishna was, and were astounded by the superhuman feats he performed at will, so nonchalantly.

They came to Nanda, and they said, 'How has a boy like Krishna been born among us common villagers? He has such exceptional powers, surely this birth as a gopa boy is not worthy of him. How can a stripling like Krishna pick up a mountain and hold it aloft for seven days, as if it were child's play to him, easily as an elephant holding a lotus in its trunk?

When he was a baby, who had barely opened his eyes and seen the world, he killed Putana by sucking the very life from her – he killed her as Time does us all, while we are hardly aware. How could an infant do this to a rakshasi?

When he was just a few months, he broke the back of Shakatasura, the cart demon, with a kick of his tiny feet. When he was a year old, he strangled Trinavarta in the sky. Can we dream of any other baby doing such things?

When Yasodha tied him to the mortar he was no more than three. He dragged the heavy stone thing between the two arjuna trees and brought them crashing down. Was this something that an ordinary child could do?

Later, in Vrindavana, he went into the forest with Rama, the other gopa boys and the calf-herd. Bakasura came as a krauncha big as a tree. He swallowed Krishna, then spat him out, and Krishna killed the monstrous crane, tearing his beak in two. Was this the feat of a small boy?

The demon Vatasura came disguised as a calf, but Krishna spotted him for what he was. He whirled him round until he died and flung him onto the crown of a kapittha tree, so all the ripe fruit came showering down. Was this the deed of a normal gopa boy?

Then, in the sacred palm grove, Balarama and Krishna slew the donkey demon Dhenuka and his tribe, truly as if they were playing some game, tossing these fiends up onto the palmyra trees, as well. How could they do this, if they are ordinary gopa boys?

Later, he had Balarama slay the ferocious Pralamba, and blew out a forest fire like a candle. Could any ordinary boys do this, then?

Just think of what he did to the terrible Kaliya – trampled him like a worm! Krishna emptied the Naga's head of its arrogance and drove him back to the sea with his wives, from the pool in the Yamuna. He first made the serpent drain all his venom from the river – was this, perhaps, the deed of a common gopa youth?

Nanda, most of all, tell us how every living soul in Gokula loves your Krishna more than his or her very life, and he too love us all equally, with an intensity and depth we can hardly believe.

And now he hoists a mountain into the air and holds it up for a week, thwarting the wrath of none less than the king of the Devas. We are bewildered, O Chieftain, Nanda, we are utterly mystified by your amazing son!'

Having heard them out patiently, Nanda replied, 'Gopas, my friends and brothers, listen to me and I will tell you what the great Brahmana Gargacharya told me in secret about Krishna. He spoke in no uncertain terms, and hearing what he said, let your doubts be laid to rest as well.

Garga said to me, "Nanda, your son is he that incarnates himself in every yuga. In the past, he has come as a white, a red and a yellow Avatara. Now he comes as a black one! You might not know this, but he was born originally as the son of Vasudeva, the Yadava. So, later, the Rishis of the world will call your Krishna Vaasudeva.

Why, he has countless names that derive from his qualities and achievements. I, Garga, know about these, but hardly know them all, while other men are entirely ignorant of them. Hear me well, Nanda, your son will help all of your tribe evolve in spirit; he will sever ancient bonds that bind your souls in ignorance.

He will delight you and your gopas and gopis; he will bring rapture to the lives of yourselves and your herd. No obstacle or danger shall prevail in your lives, for Krishna will take you past them all, easily.

There was a time on Earth, when the world was without a king and bandits and brigands ranged everywhere, bringing terror wherever they went. He incarnated himself then, and subdued or destroyed the evil ones, and the common people prospered again by his grace.

Fortunate are they that love Krishna and have his blessing. For they shall be like the devotees of Vishnu, whom the fiercest demons can never harm. Nanda, this boy is Vishnu's equal – in his qualities, his glory, his prowess, his fame, his blessedness and his majesty. He shall be like Vishnu in his wealth, as well, the lord of Sri Lakshmi.

Let no deed of Krishna surprise you, Nandagopa," said Gargacharya, the deep and subtle brahmana, to me, and then he went away. So, my friends, do not be amazed by what our Krishna does – by his uncanny strength and incomparable greatness.

Since the day Garga told me all this, I myself have looked upon my son as an Amsavatara of Vishnu Narayana.'

The gopas heard him and doubt vanished from their hearts, to be replaced by a great calm and joy. Adoration for Krishna and his father Nanda welled up in them.

Let us also remember what happened in Gokula. Let us remember how, when his annual yagna was thwarted, Indra was furious at the gopas and sent down a savage storm to drown them. When the gypsy cowherds found themselves assailed by elemental winds, rain, hail, thunder and lightning, they had no one to turn to for sanctuary but Krishna.

He, a mere boy, uprooted Mount Govardhana playfully. He held it up like some mushroom, in one hand, frustrating the wrath of the Deva king, humbling great Indra, and teaching him a lesson.

That day Krishna saved the gopas and their herd. Ah, may he save us, as well, from the storm of samsara!"

KRISHNA GOVINDA

SRI SUKA WENT ON, "WHEN HE HAD LIFTED MOUNT GOVARDHANA AND saved the gopas of Vraja, two unearthly beings came to visit Krishna. The first was the Deva king Indra, who came in some fear; the other was the divine cow of wishes, Surabhi, who came in sheer love and joy.

Guilty and afraid, realising who Krishna really was, Indra accosted him when he was alone in the forest one day. He set his crown, which shone like the sun, at Krishna's feet. The Deva felt a tide of mercy and grace, of which he had only heard, surge through him from the Avatara. Indra wept for rapture and the pride in his heart that he was the master of the three worlds was washed away. He arose, cleansed in spirit.

Folding his hands to the dark Being of perfect love before him, the gopa youth, Vishnu's Incarnation, Indra hymned Krishna.

'Visuddhasattvam tava dhaam shantam tapomayam dhvastarajastamaskam;
Maayaamayoyam gunasampravaaho na vidyate tegrahanaanubandham…

You are the being of pure sattva, full of peace, absorbed in the Spirit; no trace of rajas or tamas touches you. This evanescent world has its origin in your maya. But you are not bound by its ignorance and its darkness is not in you.

Lord, when no avidya ever enters you, then how shall the children of darkness – greed, lust, anger, or the other passions? When you assume the form of the Punisher, the Chastener, it is not from any rage in your heart, but only to protect dharma on Earth.

You are the father, the Guru, and the sovereign of all the worlds. Being master and king, you wield the sceptre of retribution – always for the weal of the world. When you incarnate yourself, as your myriad Avataras, you come in divine sport, and you humble the powerful and the self-important, who, in pride, deceive themselves that they are the masters of the fate of the world.

I myself, deluded and vain, was shackled into my dark hubris. I found you entirely without fear in the most perilous circumstance. Then pride left me and I saw the way of dharma shining before me again. Once more, I was happy to become your bhakta.

I beg you, Krishna, forgive me. Guilty I am, but I was in the clutches of the arrogance of my wealth, my position, and I did not know who you are, or the extent of your power. Lord, I beg you, let me never again become so foolish or so perverse. Preserve me from myself.

Omniscient One, you have incarnated yourself now to crush the kshatriyas of the Earth, who have become tyrants, concerned not with their dharma toward the people but only with their own power, wealth and extravagances. They have become a dark burden upon the earth.

Moreover, you have come to save those that suffer under the yoke of these monsters in human and royal guise, to rescue your bhaktas from the demented kings who have long ago abandoned the paths of justice and truth.

I salute you, O Krishna Bhagavan, who dwells in every creature, who are limitless, Vasudeva's son and the Guru and Master of all his bhaktas! I salute you, who have assumed this body, out of your divine and playful will and to please your bhaktas – this form that is still an embodiment of Absolute Consciousness. You are the ubiquitous and pervasive one, the seed of all things and the soul of every creature.

Lord, I flew into a rage, from pique and frustration, when you prevented the gopas from performing my yagna. I was blinded by anger, which I am given to because I am proud, and I loosed my unthinking storm upon Gokula.

Still, you did not hold my anger against me. You held aloft the mountain and crushed the vanity that clouded my mind and my soul. I am beholden to you, O Krishna, I seek refuge in you, knowing that you are the Lord, the Guru and the Atman of all beings.'

When Indra hymned him thus, Krishna spoke to the Deva in a voice that rumbled like thunderheads. He said with a kindly smile, 'Indra, it is true, I only thwarted your yagna to bless you. For your pride had indeed darkened your mind, and you had forgotten me, the Brahman.

Those that their wealth and power delude do not see me, and I am Death who dwells behind everything, who razes all that are born. It is those that I want to bless that I punish and humble, those whose wealth and power I take from them.

Go back to your Swarga now, Indra, and may all be well with you. Do not be arrogant or pompous anymore, but do your dharma in humility, remembering me always. Exercise the power given to you in faith and without attachment.'

Now Surabhi – Kamadhenu, divine cow of wishes – came with her calf to Krishna, the Paramatman who sported in the world in the guise of a cowherd. She said in her beautiful voice, 'Krishna, you are the greatest Yogin, you are the creator and the eternal soul of all the worlds.

In your presence, we feel we are protected by the only real king – the sovereign of the universe. Lord of all things, you be our Indra always, so that dharma, everything sacred and innocent, is preserved forever.

Brahma himself sent us here, to give you the ceremonial ablution, by which you now become our Indra. For Krishna, you have been born into this world to lighten the burdens of our mother Bhumi Devi!'

Having said this, and with Krishna's acquiescence, Surabhi performed an abhisheka for him, with her milk that is like amrita. Then Indra himself, the Deva king who still tarried there, bathed Krishna ritually in the sacred waters of the Ganga.

His white elephant Airavata brought the precious water to Vrindavana and poured it over Krishna's dark head with his trunk, out of golden chalices. Indra's mother Aditi directed the secret and awesome ceremony, and all the greatest Brahmarishis were the priests.

When he was drenched in milk and water, they all loudly called him Govinda! which means Indra of the cows. Tumburu and Narada Muni arrived there, with a host of singers and dancers out of Devaloka – Gandharvas, Vidyadharas, Siddhas and Charanas.

They sang in ecstasy about the greatness of Krishna, and about his uncanny deeds, songs that destroy men's sins. The unearthly Apsara beauties began to dance fervently, incomparably.

Why, the Devas themselves sang of Krishna's glory, and flung down storms of heavens' flowers over the youthful Avatara. Vast joy surged through creation, and the hearts of every being in the three worlds, save the most evil ones.

Pure and innocent cows drenched the blessed earth with their milk in that unbounded joy. The water in every river of the earth flowed with strange and exquisite flavours – the tastes of Swarga. Trees dripped honey from flower and bark.

Rice and other grains grew in spontaneous outbursts, without the land being tilled or sown. Mountains gave up their rarest and most valuable gemstones, great solitaires that had lain hidden away in their deepest recesses.

Dear Parikshit, when Krishna was crowned in Vrindavana, even the fiercest predators turned mild and the most venomous serpents were no longer vicious. Having made Krishna Govinda, master of cows, of Gokula, and indeed the Earth, Indra and the other immortals went back to Devaloka in the sky, from where they had come."

THE VISION OF BRAHMAN AND VAIKUNTHA

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONE DWADASI MORNING, THE SECOND DAY OF A NEW moon, Nanda came to the Yamuna to bathe. He had fasted all the previous ekadasi day.

But he had come earlier than he should – dawn was still some way off, and it was an hour when the spirits of darkness, the rakshasas, were still abroad. One of Varuna, the Sea God's, rakshasa servitors sprang out of the night, took Nanda his captive, and brought him before his master.

Krishna learnt what had happened, the birds and beasts of the jungle told him. He came to Varuna's secret palace. The Sea God leapt up in delight that the Lord had come to his home. He received Krishna with arghya and every other offering.

Varuna worshipped Krishna, and said,

'Udyame nibhrito dehodyyvaarthodhigaatah Prabho!
Tvatpaadabhaajo bhagavannavaapu paaramadhavnah…

Lord, my being born has found meaning today! Today, I have every satisfaction that life has to offer. I, your servant, have crossed the sea of samsara that I have found your feet. I salute you, O transcendent God, Bhagavan who are beyond the yogamaaya that creates the illusion of the universe.

Lord, my foolish servant, the rakshasa, who does not know right from wrong, committed this crime of bringing your father here forcefully. I beg you, forgive him, and forgive me for what he did.

O Paramatman, be gracious and bless me! Govinda, here is Nanda, your father. Take him freely from here.'

Krishna smiled and raised a hand in blessing over the Sea God. He seemed pleased by what Varuna had said and, bringing Nanda with him unharmed, he returned to Gokula, to the delight of his clansmen.

In Vraja a bedazzled, excited Nanda began to describe his adventure. He spoke in awe of the majesty and wonders of Varuna's domain, which human eyes seldom see. Most of all, the gopa chieftain was amazed by the reverence that Varuna and the other immortals in his palace had shown Krishna.

Rajan, now the gypsy cowherds were properly convinced that their Krishna was Ishwara, God himself. A new yearning awoke in the hearts powerfully – they began to wish that he would absorb them into his divine being, they wondered why he did not grant them that union, which is the goal of every Yogi.

Of course, Krishna immediately divined this new and deep aspiration of his bhaktas. In his heart of infinite kindness, he thought of a way to satisfy their longing.

Men are born into this world, into births high and low, because of avidya, which is ignorance, and its child moha, desire, and the karma they commit because of these. Plunged in ignorance and desire, they seldom realise their true, eternal selves or natures.

With this thought in his heart, Krishna decided to reveal his transcendent realm to the gopas, the place where no tamas comes, the condition that the greatest Rishis realise, who break the bonds of samsara with dhyana. Krishna showed the gypsy cowherds the Brahman, the eternal Chitta, the Infinite Being, the Light of lights, which illumines all things from within.

He led his people to the sacred pool of the Brahman – Brahmahradam – and made them submerge in it. He brought them ashore, and gave them mystic sight, with which they saw Vaikuntha, Vishnu's home – the very place he showed Akrura later during his life.

Inundated by the bliss of the experience, Nanda and the others found to their amazement that, there, the Vedas themselves, embodied and wonderful, sang hymns to their dark Krishna!"

RASALILA: WITH THE GOPIS

SRI SUKA SAID, "LONG HE HAD BEEN PROMISING TO SATISFY THE ARDENT gopis' desire for him. Now that Sharat, autumn whose nights are heady with the scent of mallika flowers, was upon Gokula and Vrindavana, Krishna decided that, with his yogamaya, he would sport at love with the women.

The full moon rose, lord of the stars. He daubed the eastern sky with a crimson blush, as a lover might his beloved's cheek with kumkum, vermilion, and bashfulness.

Krishna looked at the crimson disk of the moon, which was like the face of Sri Lakshmi herself touched with red vermilion. He saw Vrindavana bathed in the tender rays of Soma, and glowing in that cool light. He raised his flute to his lips, and blew a ravishing melody on it, an irresistible song.

The women heard that music and were enchanted. They forgot entirely who and where they were, and their spirits flew out into the silvery night, flew to Krishna, lord of their hearts. Beside themselves, the golden earrings agitated by their excitement, they ran out to keep the long-awaited tryst with him, what he had promised them months ago.

All together they flew through the night, and so completely fascinated were they that each one thought of just herself as flying to her lover – they were hardly aware that none of them was alone.

All of them had been doing some household chore. Now they abandoned whatever they had been doing, and ran blindly toward the song of the flute. One had been milking her cow; without a thought, she set her pail down and followed the magic notes of the flute. Another had milk on her fire to boil; she left that to spill over and went after the music.

Some had gruel on the fire, which they left without a moment's thought; some were serving food to the family, and set the serving dish down as soon as they heard the first few notes and ran out. Some had their babies at their breasts. They pulled their nipples from their infants' mouths and hurried out into the night.

Some were with their husbands, others were eating, themselves; without exception, they left whatever they were doing, and went to Krishna. Some were anointing their soft limbs with sandalwood paste, others were bathing, some lining their eyes with kajal, black kohl, some were putting on clothes after bathing, or making themselves up. Each one stopped what she did, and went helplessly toward the blue enchanter in the heart of the jungle, calling them with his great song.

Their husbands, fathers, brothers and other relatives direly forbade them. But Govinda had snatched their hearts away, and no one could stop them from going to him. Some unlucky women found themselves locked up inside their houses, so they could not leave. They shut their eyes and lost themselves in dhyana, in the single thought of him.

In moments, all their sins were made ashes by the agony they felt at not being able to go out to the flute song, with which their Beloved called them. But in their minds, they found him, as real, realler, than flesh and blood. He embraced them as any lover would, passionately, except that he was God, and they found the Paramatman.

Yet not for a moment did they think of him as being anyone other than Krishna, their dark lover. All their punya was exhausted by that inner embrace, and their every karma, good and bad, spent in a moment's cosmic anguish and ecstasy, these gopis gave up their bodies where they sat rapt in thought of Krishna. Their spirits flashed away to him!"

The king said, "Muni, they thought of Krishna only as a lover, never as the Brahman. This was physical lust, of the rajoguna. How then were they freed from their karma, and able to attain moksha?"

Sri Suka replied, "Did I not answer this question of yours earlier, when I told you how Sishupala, lord of the Chedis, found union with Krishna by confronting him repeatedly, by hating him? If Krishna can give moksha to a sworn enemy, who is obsessed with him, will he not give it to his lovers?

The Brahman is always beyond change. It cannot be measured or be seen. It always transcends the material universe, while it regulates its course; why else does this Brahman take a human form except to bless jivas with moksha, to break the bonds of their karma?

No matter what emotion they direct toward the Lord Hari – desire, anger, fear, affection, a sense of identification, or bhakti – all of them find his nature and are united with him. Ah, don't imagine for a moment that he cannot do this, who is the Un-born One, the Final Being, and the master of all the powers that exist. He is the very one that bestows moksha upon every jiva.

When the women arrived in a frenzied throng, where Krishna was waiting for them in the forest's heart, he lowered his flute. He smiled at them in the silver light of the moon, and how entirely ravishing his smile was, and how full of tender mockery.

The Bhagavan said to them, 'Welcome gopis, what brings you here, and what service can I render you? For certainly, I will swell my punya by serving such lovely ladies in any way whatever.

I hope all is well in Vraja, why are you out here at this hour in the dangerous jungle? Predators are on the prowl, the most deadly beasts; this is not the time for women to linger in a forest.

Besides, when your parents, sons, brothers and your husbands, especially, do not find you at home, they will panic and look for you everywhere. It is not dharma for you to cause your families such anxiety, my pretty ones.

You have seen what you came for – the silvery forest, her trees quivering at the touch of moonbeams, trembling at the caress of the breeze that blows across the Yamuna. Now go back to Vraja, hurry. You are all devoted wives, aren't you, with husbands waiting for you at home? They are your first dharma.

Also, won't your babies and your calves be hungry, and be crying to be fed? But, gopis, have you by any chance come here out of love? Love for me? If that is so, it is no great wonder – for everyone seems to love me!

But let me remind you that a woman's true dharma is to serve her husband, her parents and her children. Wives that want the world's honour never abandon their husbands – not if their men are brutish, unhappy, unfortunate, old, dim-witted, terminally ill, or impoverished. Only if a husband is irretrievably depraved is a woman justified in deserting him.

And, O gopis, to have sexual relations with a lover – oh, that is to shut heaven's door on yourself, an unwashable stain on your good names. There is nothing else as worthless, dangerous and terrifying as to be unfaithful.

As for me – have bhakti, and listen to my legends, speak and sing about me for sure, and you will love me in your spirits with a greater love than being out here in the forest with me. So, I tell you again, go home women, go home at once!'

The gopis heard this, and were shattered. They stood stricken and silent, their heads bent, their lips like berries arid with the hot dry breath they drew. Some listlessly drew long lines upon the moonlit earth with their toes, while they wept tears tinted with kajal, which dripped onto their breasts, making the saffron there run.

Those gypsy cowherdesses had abandoned everything to rush out here to blue Krishna. Now they listened to his cool, cruel indifference. They wiped their tears, and replied in voices choked with love and lust, which they could hardly help or contain.

In quick despair and anger, the gopis cried, 'Lord, do not be so savage to us! We have come to you, abandoning everything. Accept us; take our love even as the Brahman does all that come to Him for moksha. Mysterious one, do not forsake us now!

You are the source of dharma, and you say to us that the natural dharma of women is to serve their husbands, their children and families. Ah, may what you say come true for us, O greatest of all gurus – for are you not the nearest family, the husband, the child, the parent, the most beloved one for every living jiva? Are you not the Soul of all our souls?

The truly wise love only you; they turn their sole attachment just to you, the infinitely adorable Paramatman. Of what use is any other love, whether of husband or of children – finally all those relationships inexorably bring only misery.

Ah Krishna, do not sever the tender plant of our love for you; we have nurtured it long, and its roots are plunged deep in you, and none else.

Once we also delighted in the simple joys of our homes and our household chores. Then the ecstasy of your presence robbed us of our hearts, our wits, and our all. We have tried to continue with our chores in our homes, but it is as if your love bound us hand and foot, and prevented us.

Our feet can no more take a single step away from you now, then how will we return to Vraja as you are asking us to?

Oh love! With your face, your smile, your laughter, and your music you have lit a fire in our bodies and our hearts. Kiss us now, Krishna, quench the fire with the amrita from your lips! If you do not, the fire within will consume us and we shall find your feet in dhyana, and die of not having you in the flesh.

Krishna, you let us poor forest women touch your feet once, your lotus feet that even Sri Lakshmi serves only rarely. Ever since, we cannot bear to be with any other man.

Yes, Rema herself, Goddess of fortune, whose blessing even Brahma and the Devas seek, who has a permanent home at your breast – even she and the Devi Tulasi forever seek to feel the golden dust from your feet. We, too, seek sanctuary in that padadhuli!

You are he that redeems us all from this sinful life. Show us your grace now; we have come leaving everything for your sake. Hearth and home we have left, and we mean to serve you!

Your smile and the looks you give us, Krishna, have ignited us with lust, and we are on fire for you. Let us be your servants; allow us to make love to you, O you jewel among men!

We see your face, framed by black curls; your cheeks glow with the light of your golden earrings. Oh your lips, Krishna, your ambrosial lips where we would drink our sweet fill, and your mighty arms that protect your bhaktas – give us sanctuary at your wide chest, the sight of which makes Sri passionate. Let us serve you, Lord, let us be your slaves!

We swear there is no woman in any of the three worlds that would not leave the path of virtue, if she sees your form, which enchants the universe, and makes bird and beast, tree and cow thrill to you. No woman anywhere, in any time, could resist the music of your flute.

You have been born in Vraja to protect us, even as Vishnu protects the Devas. So, Krishna, friend of those that suffer, touch us, stroke our breasts that are on fire for you with your hands cool as lotuses; lay your soft palm upon our love-maddened heads. We are your slaves, Krishna, don't torment us anymore!' cried those women in many voices.

Krishna listened to their piteous outcry, and he, the master Yogin, laughed. Then, in his infinite mercy, he called them to him, and made love with the gopis in the heart of moonlit Vrindavana. Yet he remained unaffected by what he did – so awesomely, so exquisitely – and was perfectly absorbed only in the bliss of his Atman all the while.

He came among them, and their faces lit up like lotuses in full bloom, glowing that he looked at them. His movements were so full of grace, why they embodied grace, his smile was so mysterious so entirely enchanting, showing teeth like jasmine flowers.

He was like the full moon amidst the stars.

They now ranged the forest, Krishna and that bevy of more than a hundred women. They sang to him in love and praise, and he played on his flute so the jungle quivered with bliss. Such a divine sight he was, his stride a thing of complete beauty, the vanamala of wildflowers, which dangled to his knees, swaying at his every step. He enhanced the beauty of the silvery forest; he transformed it into a sublime, unearthly wonder.

They came to the Yamuna, her sandbanks like snow in the flowing moonlight. He touched them, caressed them, and kissed them beside the dreamy river, while the breeze bore fine spray into their shining faces, and blew the scent of waterlilies across them.

Now his lovemaking was more flagrant than before. He pulled them to him, embraced them quite wantonly. He ran his dark fingers through their hair as he pleased, and slipped his hands into their blouses and stroked their naked throbbing breasts. He marked their soft skins and limbs with his fingernails, so they cried out in excitement.

They trembled at his potent looks, his laughter, and his caresses; ah, he inflamed them almost past endurance and they were happier than they could have dreamt. When they paused in their loveplay, and could think, pride swelled in their breasts that this was Krishna, the Lord of everything, with whom they were making love. They gopis thought of themselves as surely being the best of all women.

Krishna saw that pride in their eyes, and he vanished from their midst like a dream. He wanted to make them suffer, to purify them, so they became worthy of his love and grace."

THE GOPIS SEPARATED FROM KRISHNA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "WHEN KRISHNA VANISHED, THE GOPIS GASPED, they sobbed, they set up a lament. They were as distraught as the cow elephants of a herd become when the ruling bull disappears.

They felt helpless, weak, abandoned. They were absorbed by him, and all that he did – his walk, his smile, the way he moved his hands and limbs, his face and gracious, powerful body, his sweet talk, his potent love, and of course, his wild and masterful lovemaking.

They identified with him so much that when he went from their midst they began, one by one, to declare that she was Krishna, and to mimic him, and what he did, with amazing likeness. Singing as they had done with him, they ranged the forest, dementedly, looking for him, unmindful of whatever dangers to which they might expose themselves.

They went upto every tree, and asked where he was, the ineffable One, who pervades all beings, all things, even the subtle akasa, the fifth element.

'O Nyarodga! O Plaksha, Aswattha, Kurabaka, Asoka, O Naga, O Punnaga, O Champa, have you seen Nanda's son, who stole our hearts with his smiles, with his looks of searing love? Have you seen Balarama's brother Krishna, whose smile not the proudest woman can resist?'

'O sacred Tulasi, have you seen the most precious one, who always carries your leaves around on his vanamala, with all the honey-bees that swarm to your scent?'

'O scented Malathi, O Mallika, did our Madhava come by here, and enrapture you with a casual touch of his hand as he passed?'

'O Choota, Priyala, Panasa, Asana, Kovidara!'

'O Jambu, Arka, Vilva, Bakula!'

'O Aamra, Kadamba, O Neepa, O all you trees that grace the banks of the Yamuna for all our sakes! We beg you, tell us where Krishna is, for we are dying without him.'

'Bhumi Devi, Earth Mother, surely your punya is great, and great must have been your tapasya of the past – for all these grasses grow so lush and thick upon your skin, from excitement at the touch of his feet. Did his feet touch you just now, as he passed this way?'

'Or does your grass grow because you are still aquiver from the touch of his feet when he bestrode you as the Vamana?'

'Or is it your ecstasy that still lasts when he raised you up from Patala on his tusks as the Varaha, and embraced you when he did?'

'Ah, sweet friend doe, wife of the antlered stag! Did Krishna come this way with some love of his, and sweep you with bliss by the sight of his face? For I smell the kunda flowers he wears on his vanamala, and the scent is mixed with that of saffron from a woman's breasts.'

'Ah friend, mighty tree, did he come this way, with his arm around the shoulder of his lover, with bees buzzing around the tulasi he wears? And when you greeted him by bending your branches low in adoration, did he care at least to return your greeting with a look of affection from his eyes? Or was he too absorbed in the woman he was with?'

'For sure, the vines and creepers tightly embrace their husbands the trees. Yet I think Krishna has touched them with his fingers, or why have they sprouted an abundance of green shoots?'

Talking thus, like madwomen, to one another and the forest, seeking Krishna dementedly through Vrindavana, the women grew so intensely absorbed with him in their minds that they now began to playact the legends of his childhood.

One gopi pretended to be the savage Putana, while another became Krishna. Putana bared her breasts and suckled the infant Godchild, who drank thirstily there. One woman lay on her back, again as Krishna the baby, while another crouched over her, mimicking Shakatasura the cart-demon. The gopi that was Krishna cried loudly, as if she was hungry and flailed out with her legs, kicking the other.

Yet another gopi began to crawl everywhere, busily, while the little bells on her anklets, necklaces, bangles and bracelets jingled quite as the baby Krishna's used to when he crawled vigorously about.

Two of the gypsy women impersonated Krishna and Balarama, when they were a little older; some others became the other gopa boys and their calves. At their feverish, rapt play, one gopi became the demon Vatsasura, while another played Baka, who came as the devilish crane. Both died.

The women were entirely absorbed, and even seemed to find their lost love again in their strange playacting, to find uncanny union with him. A gopi who was Krishna called out through cupped palms at some others: who were the herd that had strayed.

One played on an imaginary flute, whilst others danced like joyful boys and cows, and the rest clapped their hands, sang, and cried out in transport.

Identifying with the Dark One, one gopi wrapped her arm around another's shoulders, and walked her down a forest trail, saying, 'I am Krishna, watch me walk, look at my lordly gait!'

Cried another, 'Don't fear wind or rain, I am here to protect you!' And she raised her blouse aloft, baring her breasts in the moon, and held it above her head as if with a huge effort: as if it was Mount Govardhana.

O King, another two gopis now became Krishna and Kaliya. One climbed onto the other's head, and began to dance there, crying, 'Vile serpent! Slide away from here and never return! For I am come to punish evil ones like you.'

Another said coolly, 'Gopas, look, the forest burns. But fear nothing, only shut your eyes a moment and there will be no more fire.'

Another took her garland from her throat and tied her friend to a great log of wood, as if it were a mortar, while the one tied up feigned fear of his mother. They roamed the forest, truly mad for him, seeking him everywhere.

As they went along, asking every tree and vine where Krishna was, suddenly they saw his footprints on some soft earth – certainly the footmarks of that embodied Brahman.

'Look!' cried one gopi. 'These are surely the footprints of Nanda's incomparable son. For no one else's feet bear the signs of the flag, the lotus, the thunderbolt, the hook, the grain of rice, and all the rest.'

As they followed the trail of those precious prints, they saw another trail of footmarks interwoven with Krishna's – smaller feet, a woman's.

One gopi asked, 'Who is the lucky wretch that he leads through the forest with his arm round her? She is the cow-elephant with whom the great tusker, the lord of the herd, chooses to mate!'

'Surely, she has worshipped him best that he has abandoned the rest of us, and taken her into the forest alone.'*

'Oh, friends, his padadhuli that you see here is the most precious dust in creation! Brahma, Siva and Lakshmi wear it on their heads to be rid of their sins.'

'Yet, how I hate to look at the footprints of this woman. She has stolen what belongs to us all – the nectar of his lips, the amrita of his kisses! Ah, she keeps him for herself, and enjoys him in solitude.'

'But look here! Her footprints have vanished. He must have set her upon his shoulders, to keep her soft feet from being cut by blades of grass.'

'Ah Gopis look how his footmarks grow deeper here. He's stricken by love, and certainly carries her upon his shoulders or in his arms.'

'Look! Look here how you see just the marks of the front of his feet and his toes, and no trace of his heels. He must have stood on tiptoe, so she could pluck the flowers from this tree.'

Another said wistfully, 'Then they sat here, and he wove the flowers into her hair.' "

Sri Suka paused in thought, meditative for a moment, then resumed slowly, "He was always absorbed in his Atman, the Brahman within, and in infinite bliss. Surely, that absorption was not broken for a moment while he made love with the gopis. But why did he do it?"

Vyasa's son, the great Sage, paused again, as if doubt touched his heart, then continued, "Surely, it was to show how sexual love enslaves a lover, and to show to what depths women can sink when they are making love. Imagine all of them together! So obsessed, so mad.

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* This is said to be the only probable reference to Radha in the text.

The gopis roamed through Vrindavana in a deranged throng in quest of Krishna, often howling as women possessed do. Meanwhile, the one woman, with whom he had gone alone, for earlier she had been untouched by the vanity of the rest at being with him, also fell prey to pride.

She thought, 'I am the best of all women, for among us all who climbed aboard Kama's ratha, Krishna has left the rest and just chosen me.'

When they had made their way under the white moon for a while, she said to him, in conceit, 'I cannot walk any further. If you want me to go on with you, you have to carry me, wherever it is that you are taking me.'

Quietly, he asked her to climb onto his shoulders. As she swung her leg over his back, he vanished. She trembled; she realised what had happened to her. She beat her breast and cried, 'O my Lord, where have you gone? Krishna, I beg you, show yourself to me! Ah my love – strongest, highest, most beloved one – come back to me! My heart is breaking, and I am dying. I am your slave, Krishna, I beg you, show yourself to me.'

As she wrung her hands and wailed, the other gopis arrived where she was, and found her like that. Sobbing, she told them what had happened – how she walked alone with him, in enchantment and love, until white pride pierced her through; she dared command him to carry her upon his shoulders, and he disappeared. The others listened in amazement.

They went on together on their quest for Krishna, as far into the forest as they dared, as far as the moon penetrated the canopy above. Then they arrived past all the lighter forest at the edge of a grim zone of the jungle, which was a forbidding mass of blackness. They dared not go on.

Meanwhile, they had come far indeed, most of all in their hearts. All their thought bent upon him, talking only about him, singing of him, often imitating his walk and what he did, as if indeed his spirit possessed them – the gopis had forgotten themselves, certainly their homes and families. They were lost in love of Krishna.

Retreating from the lightless part of the forest, they gathered again on the banks of the Yamuna, where he had sat with them earlier, in love's prelude. Chastened, they sat on sand like silver dust and began to sing his praises, hoping to draw him back to them with their song."

THE SONG OF THE GOPIS

SRI SUKA SAID, "THE GOPIS SANG IN THEIR ANGUISH,

'Jayati te adhikam janmana Vrajah Shrayata Indira Shashradatra hih; dayati drishyataam dikshu taavkaastvayi dhritaasavastavaam vichinvate...

Beloved, Vraja prospers incalculably after you were born among us, for Lakshmi, the Goddess of fortune, lives here to attend upon you. The world rejoices, but not us gopis, whose lives are mere playthings for you. We are in torment, looking for you everywhere. Ah sweet Krishna, let us see you again, don't make us wait anymore.

Lord of love and lovemaking! You are as good as killing us by keeping away. We are like your slaves, and you have looked at us with your eyes that rob the splendour and the colour of the inside of a lotus in bloom, upon a clear lake in autumn.

Mighty Lord, O bull among men, so often you have saved our lives – saved us from death by drinking Kaliya's venom, from Aghasura the python, from Indra's storm, rain, wind, lightning and fire, from Mayaa's son Vyomasura, from Arishta, and from every danger. Why have you grown indifferent now, Krishna? Do not make us wait, show yourself to us.

Ah, most beloved friend, you are not only the gopika's son, you are the omnipresent witness, who dwells in all the embodied. When Brahma worshipped you, you dawned like the sun upon the earth, being born into the clan of the Sattvatas, to protect the worlds. You should not be callous now; come show yourself before our yearning eyes.

Greatest of Vrishnis, enchanter, set your hand of grace upon our heads – the hand that grants refuge from samsara to those that seek sanctuary at your feet. Yours is the hand that gives every boon to your bhaktas, for it is the hand that took Sri Lakshmi's hand in holy marriage. Lord, we beg you, show yourself to us!

O you are the scourge of the sorrows of Vraja. Mighty hero! You are the beloved whose very smile is enough to wipe away the pride in your people's hearts. We have come begging to you – accept us, show us your face as beautiful as a lotus. Don't make us wait, Krishna, appear before our eyes again.

Whoever prostrates at your feet has their sins burnt up in a moment – your sacred feet that wander after the hoofprints of the grazing herd, your feet that are the refuge of Sri Lakshmi, your feet that danced upon Kaliya's head. Why shouldn't you set those feet upon our breasts, and cool our flaming lust for you? Lord, come into the sight of our thirsty eyes.

Lotus-eyes, even the Munis of the world, the wisest men, are fascinated by your voice, your exquisite speech and your wisdom. We gopis, your poor slaves, have lost our minds hearing you. Ah, bring back the honey from your lips, Krishna, don't make us wait like this.

The amrita of your legends revives the parched, suffering spirits of men. The nectar washes the sins of common folk, while the Sages live upon the sacred substance. Those that sing of your life are the greatest, most generous ones, spreading your fame through the world. Come to us now, Krishna, we are mad for you!

O beloved, arch deceiver, we are beside ourselves after you aroused us with your smile, your looks, everything that you do, all of which is worthy of dhyana, your wanton, loving talk when you were alone with us. Do not stay away any longer, we cannot bear it.

Precious love, lord of hearts, when you leave Vraja to tend the cows, won't your lotus-like feet be savaged by thorns and sharp stones? Come to us, Krishna, how will we wait any longer?

Every morning you take the herd to graze, clever one. When we see you return at dusk, you face like a lotus caked with dust and framed by your dark locks, hot desire surges in our hearts again, and is a tide in our bodies. Don't wait to appear before us, our eyes burn for the sight of you.

You are he that heals all sorrow. Set your soft dark feet on our breasts, Krishna, your feet, which are so munificent to your bhaktas, which the lotus-born Devi Padma adores, which everyone remembers during danger, whose touch confers instant peace. Come to us, O lover.

O great hero of the realm of love! Give us the honey of your lips to drink, which sharpens the joy of love, which surely removes the very shadow of grief, the lips which your resonant flute kisses daily, and which efface every other desire from the heart. Lord, do not make us wait any longer, ah, come now sweet Krishna!

When you are away with the cows during the days, each heartbeat seems like a lifetime to us. When you return, such joy fills us and we think that Brahma is a fool to have given us eyelids that blink so we do not see your perfect face for a moment. Come, Lord, come quickly to us.

Immortal One, without a thought for our husbands, our sons, brothers and our families, we came flying to you when we heard you call with your flute song. O rogue, who but you would abandon us women here in the wilderness, at dead of night? When will you come to us, we are here just for you?

Don't you see the frenzy that grips us – storms of passion rage through our hearts when we think of everything you said and did to us while we were with you. We see your face in our minds, your smile, and your eyes so full of mockery and love. We see your great chest, where the Devi Sri dwells. Come to us, Lord.

Precious lover, you took a human form so you could rid us of our sorrows – especially the people of Gokula, and most of all we who are out here now in Vrindavana for your sake. Of course, you also came to save the world. Why are you so miserly with the specific that you came to administer, of which you have such an abundance? Why do you hesitate to cure the maladies of our hearts? Don't wait any longer, but come to us, ah beloved Lord.

Yatthe sujaatacharanaamburuham staneshu bheetah shanaih priya dadheemahi karkasheshu; tenaataveematasi vyathate na kimsvit koorpaadibhirbhrahmati dheerbhavadaayushaam nah.

Dearest, we swear we will hold your petal feet only very tenderly between our swollen breasts. We live just for you, Krishna, and we are so sad to think that those soft feet are being pierced by thorns and cut by stones.' "

KRISHNA REAPPEARS

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "THE GOPIS SANG THUS, AT THE TOP OF THEIR voices; they wailed and ranted in the grip of their absolute desire. Suddenly, he reappeared in their midst, smiling as always.

He wore a tawny pitambara robe, a wildflower garland round his neck, and he was so bewitching now that even Kama Deva, the God of love, would have lusted after him.

Even as an unconscious man's limbs revive, all together, when vital prana returns to his body, the gopis rose from their grief when they saw Krishna. Their pupils dilated with a shock of joy, and as if to drink him in whole.

They made drinking glasses of their eyes, and the more they drank of the sight of his beautiful face, the thirstier they grew for more – even as Munis feel about his holy feet.

One went up to him boldly, and in a swoon, and clasped his right hand in both her palms. Another took his left palm, soft, and fragrant as sandalwood, and set it upon her right shoulder.

Another held her hands out, joined and adoring, received the betel rolls that he had been chewing, and chewed them herself. One gopi lay at his feet and, baring herself, pressed them against her naked breasts as if to cool the anguish, the pain of having been apart from him.

One woman felt a pang of rage that her love was unrequited, and her brows arched in the momentary rictus. She bit her lip and cast murderous looks at him. Another gazed at his dark and shining face, unwinkingly, never turning away. She gazed, and was not satisfied, and stood transfixed – her eyes were like the greatest bhaktas that serve the Lord's feet and never have enough of it.

Another drew him into her heart through the portal of her eyes, and embraced him there. As the greatest yogis do, in dhyana, she experienced mystic communion and ecstasy. Tears flowed down her face, and her hair stood on end, while she cried out in bliss.

As men's greatest anxieties do in deep sleep, the women's grief at having been separated from him melted away, and instead a riot of joy swept through them, body and soul, at seeing him again.

Surrounded by the gopis, Krishna, of perfect perfection and immutable mercy, shone as the Purusha does, when He is among his Shaktis, his cosmic powers embodied.

He, the pervasive One, now led them through the forest again in a throng. Once more, they arrived on the white banks of the dark and deep-flowing Kalindi. The silvery night was laden with the scents of mandara and mallika flowers in bloom, and hummed with bees drawn to fragrant blooms.

The river Goddess Kalindi had made soft charming dunes with her arms of waves: it seemed for Krishna to sit upon with his women. Here there was no awning of branches; the moon shone clear, shimmering on water and sparkling sand, and made a dreamscape of that place.

As illumined men pass beyond the shackles of their minds by Vedic revelation, the gopis saw this ethereal place and passed beyond all their raging grief of a short while ago. Inside the dream now, with him, they drew off their blouses, and, heaping these on the sand, made a soft and colourful throne for Krishna, one stained with the saffron powder they wore on their breasts.

The Lord, who is usually enthroned only in the hearts of Yogis, now sat upon this exceptional seat, which the gopi women piled for him. He sat there, in a resplendent form under the cascading moon, and it seemed that he was the focus of all the beauty ever manifested in the three worlds.

Ah, they caressed and fondled him. They stroked his hands, took his legs onto their laps and stroked them. They whispered, babbled his praises. Yet they also knit their brows as if in some annoyance, for their love was still frustrated, and spoke to him with pique upon their faces and in their voices.

Said the gopis, archly, 'Some are fortunate enough to love those that requite their feelings. Others fall in love with those that do not return their affections. There are still others who bear no love for anyone – those that love them, or those that do not. Tell us, Krishna, which of these three is the most virtuous, the most praiseworthy?'

The Bhagavan replied, 'Where the love is mutual, of giving and receiving, selfishness is the only real motive. There is no true altruism involved. My beauties, where love is selfless, and exists even when is it unreturned, the lovers are of two kinds – men that are naturally compassionate and loving, and others who are paternal.

Then there are those that love no one, regardless of whether they are loved themselves. These are of three sorts. The Atmaramas are absorbed in the Atman, which includes all beings, all creation. The Aptakaamas have no desires or wants, and so do not need relationships of any sort. Finally, there is the Akritagya, the brute who cares nothing for his elders, masters or anyone, who is incapable of any loving.

But I am none of these, sweet friends! If I seem remote, and keep away from those that love me, it is only to encourage the love's growth in dhyana, in constant remembrance. When the man who has toiled all his life to become wealthy loses all his wealth, he becomes absorbed in that single thought, to the exclusion of every other.

Gopis, I left you for this brief time only to make your longing for me stronger. For you have forsaken your reputations, homes, families, and your prospects in this world, for my sake. Why, you have renounced what the Vedas promise as reward in the life to come, to be out here with me.

I wanted to serve your interest, gopis, and I heard all that you said and sang, and I watched everything you did. Precious women, do not make this a cause for complaint against me.

Not by serving you for numberless cosmic years of the Devas can I pay you back for what you have done tonight – such surrender you have commited, such resplendent surrender! In a night, in one stroke, you have severed every bond of attachment, left every shred of selfishness behind, left hearth and home, and all that is mundane. For me, for love of me.

This debt is too deep to ever repay. So let what you have done tonight be its own reward!' said Krishna to those lovely gypsy cowherdesses."

RAASA KRIDA: THE DANCE OF LOVE

SRI SUKA SAID, "DEAR PARIKSHIT, THE GOPIS HEARD WHAT KRISHNA said, so full of love. They felt his touch, touched his divine body, and their pangs at having been apart from him cooled, and passed.

Now, Govinda, who is the embodiment of the Vedas, began the great dance, the Raasa Krida, with the jewel-like gopis. The women linked their hands to form a circle round him, while the moon stopped in the sky to gaze down at this spectacle. No vestige of pride remained in their hearts, but only a spirit of complete surrender, and untold joy at being here with him.

Using his yogic power, Krishna appeared as many Krishnas now – there was a Krishna between every pair of gopis, with his arms flung round all their necks. Each woman felt she had Krishna to herself, that he was only with her, and that he embraced her alone.

No sooner did Krishna begin his Raasa Krida, than the sky filled with Devas in their subtle ships, vimanas, and their celestial women with them, agog to see Krishna's dance of love.

Delicate, complex drumrolls filled the moonlight, and a rain of flowers of the Gods fell. The greatest Gandharva minstrels began to sing, and the Apsaras joined their songs, which told of Krishna, the Lord who sanctifies the world.

Krishna danced to those songs and the sounds of the gopis' bangles, anklets and the little bells that hung from their girdles mingled with those of their lover's ornaments. Between each pair of gopis, he was like a great emerald between two golden beads. He was blue as a sapphire, but their golden complexions and the moon made him shine deep green that night – he, the glorious Lord, Devaki's son.

Their steps were measured and knowing; the movements of their arms and hands were full of art and joy. Their smiles were full of abandon, their eyebrows arched, also dancing. Their naked breasts quivered, their slender waists bent to the music as if they would break. Their clothes shimmered in silver light; their gypsy earrings danced against their cheeks.

Their careful braids soon came undone, and fell loose. Their golden girdles and their colourful skirts clung precariously to their waists as they danced wildly, and beads of sweat quickly covered their lovely faces in the heat of the dance. They sang rapturously of him, Krishna's dancing partners, the gopis, and they were as startling, as brilliant, as beautiful as streaks of lightning against a circle of dark thunderclouds – for he was everywhere, having assumed so many forms.

His hands were upon them, his arms round them, and they filled the luminous night with their voices raised in many songs. Beside themselves to be with him, they danced under the gleaming moon.

They sang together, Krishna and the gopis. One of them raised her voice like a bird, an exact octave above the others. Krishna cried out in pleasure; he sang her praises. The young woman sang the same tune, but now in a different tempo – the dhruvataala – and fetched more praise from her dark lover.

Another girl was exhausted with the frenzied dancing. She could barely stand; the garlands in her hair hanging loose, her bracelets as well, she supported herself in a manner that pleased her deeply – she clung tightly to Krishna.

Another gopi sniffed his hands resting upon her shoulder. Krishna's hand was smeared with sandalwood paste, it was as subtly redolent as a lotus, and she kissed it in a fever, while the fine hair on her body stood on end.

Another, upon whose face the reflection of the moon against her earrings swayed, suddenly pressed her cheek to Krishna's. Turning to her, so tenderly, he softly pressed his mouth to hers and gave her the roll of betel-leaf he was chewing.

Another gopi had danced more vigorously than anyone, singing her own songs and in time to the sounds her anklets and the bells at her waist made. She, too, felt tired, and as if to revive herself, quickly took Krishna's soft palm and pressed it to her bare breasts.

Now they had him for their lover – the Immortal One whom the Devi Lakshmi adores, and no one else. The gopis felt his arms around their naked shoulders and their necks, his hands upon them, and they danced and sang in absolute surrender, to the night, the songs, and to him. The moon stood still; the night stood still; time stood still.

The gopis danced with the Blessed One, and their faces shone, the blue lilies they wore in their ears were bright, their locks fell wild over their faces covered in films of sweat from their exertions. The flower-strings woven into their hair kept falling, and the bees that hummed over the flowers provided the sruti for the women's songs. Their anklets, bangles tinkling together, the bells upon their girdles – all these were like musical instruments.

Krishna played with the gypsy women, rather as a child will with his own image in a mirror. He embraced them, fondled them, gave them ardent looks, kissed them long and deep, and favoured them with his matchless smiles and often his unrestrained laughter.

Lord of the Kurus, so enthralled were the women by the bliss of the touch of his body that they did not anymore pick up the flowers that fell from their loose tresses, the ornaments that fell from their bodies, or even their long skirts, which now began to slip down from their waists with the dance.

Above, in the sky, the wives of the Devas, the Apsaras, Gandharvis, and the rest saw Krishna's sporting with the gopis, and they were overwhelmed. Some swooned, while others sat quivering in their vimanas, just as Soma the Moon did, with his retinue of stars; and the night was long.

In that cosmic night, Krishna replicated himself, now assuming one identical form for each gopi, and he made love with them all, in the heart of Vrindavana, in myriad hearts of that magic jungle.

Then, tired as they were with dancing and with love, he tenderly wiped the sweat from their faces with his hands. This caress appeared to rejuvenate them instantly. Their faces shone again, full of desire and excitement, with the light of their smooth skins, of the moon, the ornaments that reflected the moon's light against their cheeks. How they smiled at him when he wiped the sweat from their faces; they sang to him in complete joy – singing about his life, and his love.

Every pale flower on every gopi's body was crushed by now, and tinted with the saffron from their breasts, which had mingled with their sweat and smeared itself all over them – by Krishna's caresses, his repeated embraces, his dark body. He, the Lord, who had breached every law of conventional dharma, now walked among them like some great bull elephant – the patriarch – among his cows. He took them down to the waters of the Yamuna, to bathe, to renew themselves, and be rid of their tiredness. For he was still as fresh as when they began.

They entered the languid river together, laughing and splashing him. Such flagrant looks they still gave him, they whose love-cries had quickened the jungle some moments ago. Truly like a great and powerful elephant Krishna swam and played in the deep river with those women, while from on high, from their subtle skyships, the Devas and their women flung down another rain of heaven's flowers over them.

Through all this, loving and passionate as he was or seemed, in his spirit Krishna remained unattached, and absorbed in his infinite Self, the bliss of the Brahman. His virility was boundless, as was he, and he was never spent.

They emerged from the Yamuna and made love again in the airy woods on the riverbank, fragrant with the breeze that blew through them, carrying the scents of every flower that grew on land and in water across the forest. The honeybees swarmed after them – the young king tusker in rut, leaking ichor, wearing his garland of kunda flowers, and his she-elephants!

Throughout autumn, the season of Sharat, blessed with all things beautiful of which poets love to sing, Krishna dallied with the gopis in Vrindavana, always at love, never wasting a moment. Yet, so absolutely was he established in the Atman that he never spent himself once, though he made love every night to all those beautiful women."

Raja Parikshit said thoughtfully, "Brahma worshipped Mahavishnu to incarnate himself on earth to remove Bhumi Devi's burden of evil and to bring dharma back to the world. Vishnu was born in amsa, as Krishna.

O Muni, he is the one that creates the laws of dharma, protects and teaches them, too. I cannot fathom how he committed this most heinous sin – of having sexual relations with the wives of other men!

Krishna, lord of the Yadavas, is an enlightened one, in whom no trace of any unfulfilled desire lingers. I cannot conceive how he sinned with the gopis. My mind is in torment, O Suka, I beg you set it at rest."

Sri Suka said gently, "The greatest lords of the earth have been known to transgress dharma, when the mood of adventure is upon them. Yet no sin clings to them for this as it might to lesser men – the great fire is not polluted by burning anything that comes in its way, be it not the basest fuel.

Surely, the weak man must never commit this sin, of adultery, not even in his mind! He that attempts to imitate Krishna's deeds, without being Krishna, is a fool. He will kill himself as certainly as the man who is not Rudra will, if he drinks poison as Rudra did the Halaahala with impunity.

What the Avatara teaches is for all men to live by, but not necessarily everything that he does. Surely, a wise man will not dare try to emulate the actions of an incarnate God. Beings like Krishna are devoid of any egoism. There is no trace of selfishness in what they do. They are beyond the law of karma – they gain nothing from doing dharma, and suffer nothing by doing the opposite.

The Lord himself, who is the master, the one who controls the life of every created being – animal or bird, human or celestial – is beyond piety and impiety, beyond good and evil. The morality that binds other beings by cause and effect has no power over him, the Paramatman.

Why, even Rishis who have worshipped the pollen-like padadhuli of his lotus feet are set free from the rigors of karma. They do as they please, and are not bound by their actions. Then how can we imagine for a moment that the Lord himself is ruled by karma?

I say to you, he dwells not merely in the gopis but in their husbands, too. He abides in every embodied being; he is every one of them. For his lila, his divine sport, he, the universal witness, assumed a dark blue form and walked the earth as Krishna. For that pervasive, infinite One, where is there any distinction between himself and any other? Where does the question of judging him ever arise?

He comes just to bless the living, taking a human form that is suitable to fulfil this mission. He came to draw not just the spiritually inclined but even the more sensual to himself, when they hear about his Raasa Kridha.

Besides, all those nights in autumn, he exerted his great yogic power, and the gopis husbands felt that their women were beside them all the while, serving them, talking to them, even lying with them. Those men never felt any tinge of jealousy, nor were they in the least aware of what went on beneath the moon and the stars out in sacred, exotic Vrindavana.

Just before dawn came, rose-fingered, when the Brahma muhurta arrived, Krishna would coax the gopis to return to their homes. With many a last embrace and final kiss, they would leave him, so reluctantly.

He that recounts or repeatedly listens to the legend of the Raasa Kridha, Krishna's wild and wonderful dalliance with the gopis in Vrindavana – knowing that Krishna was Mahavishnu himself, the Cosmic Being, and that the dance and the lovemaking were profound and mystical – that man surely finds the highest bhakti. Quickly, he is purified of lust, that universal sickness of the human heart."

THE SALVATION OF SUDARSHANA AND SANKHACHUDA

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONCE, DURING A SACRED FESTIVAL, THE GOPAS WENT in great excitement on a pilgrimage to Ambikavana, riding in their ox-carts. Rajan, they bathed in the golden Saraswati, and then worshipped the Lord Parameshwara Siva and his consort Parvati. They offered them flowers, sandalwood paste and different kinds of food.

The gypsy cowherds gave generous gifts to brahmanas – cows, gold, clothes, payasam, honey, in the name of the Lord Siva, so He would be gracious to them. The gopa chieftains like Nanda and Sunandaka fasted all day, keeping a holy vrata, only drinking water. They spent the night on the banks of the Yamuna.

As they lay asleep beside the murmuring water, a gigantic python, upon his nightly hunt and ravenous this night, happened by. He seized the sleeping Nanda in his great coils, and opened jaws big as a cave to swallow the cowherd chieftain. He began with the cowherd's feet and legs.

Waking up, finding himself held fast, and gazing into slitted ochre eyes, Nanda gave a terrific shout. 'Krishna!' he cried. 'My son, save me from this serpent! I seek refuge in you, Krishna, save me.'

The other gopas awoke to hear his cries, and stood shocked and dazed to see Nanda held fast by the python. They seized firebrands from the fire they had built to sleep around, and thrust these at the snake's body. The creature hissed like a storm; it wriggled this way and that; the firebrands marked its damp scales, but it did not release Nanda.

Then Krishna arrived there. He looked at the great constrictor for just a moment, then stretched out a dark foot and touched the python with it. There was a flash of light on the banks of the Yamuna. All his sins forgiven by the touch of the Lord's foot, that being who had become a serpent cast off the reptile's body and stood before them as a brilliant Vidyadhara.

So illustrious and splendid was that being, that the gopas and the terrified Nanda gasped to see him. The Vidyadhara wore the most exquisite ornaments, and truly his beauty was not of this Earth. He prostrated before Krishna, then stood up again, palms folded to the Avatara.

Krishna asked, 'Who are you, that have such beauty and lustre? How did you come to be the wretched python?'

He who had been the snake replied, 'I am the Vidyadhara Sudarshana, and I was known for my bright looks and I roamed where I pleased in my vimana. I was vain, arrogant of my beauty.

Once, I mocked the Rishis called the Angiras, who are neither beautiful nor graceful. They cursed me to become the python. The curse of the Sages of mercy has proved to be the greatest blessing for me – for ah, it brought me here to be touched by your sacred foot, Lord, which are the Jagadguru! That touch has washed all my sins.

Now, O God that gives sanctuary from the terror of samsara to all those that seek refuge in you, allow me to return to my home among the stars. Deathless, ageless One, the vision of you has freed me from the curse of the Rishis.

Only by chanting your name does a man purify himself, and those that listen to your name. Then what wonder is there that the touch of your foot has redeemed me?'

Krishna raised his hand in a blessing over Sudarshana. His hands folded, the Vidyadhara walked round the Incarnation in a solemn pradakshina. Then he flew straight up into the sky in a blaze of light and vanished.

Thus Krishna saved Nanda's life from the snake. When the others from Vraja heard what had happened, they were astonished yet again by something Krishna had done. They completed the worship that they had come to perform, and made their way home to Gokula, speaking of nothing else other than the incident with Sudarshana, the python, who was in fact a Vidyadhara.

Another mooned night, Krishna and Balarama roamed through Vrindavana with a group of gopis. The women were beautifully dressed, they wore the loveliest ornaments, and they sang impassionedly to the divine brothers, their escorts.

Drenched in silver light, bees still swarmed to the white jasmines. A delicate breeze bore the scents of lotuses that grew on the Yamuna through the trees. Quickened by the women's songs and the night, Krishna and Rama began to play on their flutes – mystic music! The gopis were entranced; every creature in that jungle was enchanted. The women never knew when the jasmine wreaths slipped from their hair, or when their hair fell loose. They never realised when the clothes slipped away from their nubile bodies – as if the garments were also fascinated by the flute songs – and left the young women stark naked.

They danced wildly; they sang to the brothers' unworldly music. They were drunk with that song, in the grip of transcendent feelings, unaware anymore of where or indeed who they were.

At this time, a yaksha called Shankachuda, one of Kubera's most powerful chieftains, was passing through Vrindavana. He saw the naked gopis, and decided that he must have them for himself. Even as Krishna and Balarama watched, he cast a spell over the women and made off with them, flying north, where the Lokapala Kubera rules.

Waking rudely from their dream of bliss, the women found themselves abducted by a feral Guhyaka, fanged, strange and altogether terrible. They began to scream in one voice, as a cow taken by a tiger might.

Krishna and Rama put away their flutes and set off in hot chase. As they went, they drew two young sala trees from the ground to be their weapons. The Guhyaka sped along through the forest, but the brothers came after him like Time and Death, which devour all things.

Seeing them, Shankachuda released the women and fled. The Yaksha wore a great gemstone on his head, and Krishna pursued him for that jewel with occult powers, while Balarama stayed with the gopis, watching over them.

That being ran like the wind through the trees, dodging this way and that, but Krishna caught up with him and with a blow of hand struck his head from his neck, and the precious gemstone with it. He came back and gave that powerful jewel to his brother Balarama, while the gopis watched."

YUGALA GITAM

SRI SUKA SAID, "WHENEVER KRISHNA WENT TO THE FOREST DURING the days, the gopis spent their time yearning for him, in sorrow, and they sang softly, sweetly of his love, his mystic lovemaking with them.

The women said:

'Vaamabaahu kritavaamakapolo valgitabhruradhararpita venum;
Komalaanguli abiraatritamaargam gopya eeryati yetra Mukundam...

Gopis! When Mukunda sets his lips to his flute, his cheek bent to his left shoulder, his brows arched and quivering, and his exquisite fingers flying across the bamboo's seven holes, the wives of the Siddhas hovering in their vimanas above blush with lust, and hardly notice how their clothes slip away from their slender bodies.

Girls! Listen to this great news – when Nanda's son Krishna plays his flute, his smile lighting the pearl necklaces across his chest where Lakshmi dwells like a streak of lightning, our bulls and cows, and every other wild animal come thronging. The herd stands transfixed, ears erect, not chewing the cud in their mouths – as if they were dead or creatures in a painting.

Ah friend! When Krishna dresses like a wrestler, wearing plumes of peacock-feathers, face and body painted in mineral dyes, draped in garlands of new green leaves, and, standing among Balarama and the gopas, calls the herd by playing on his flute, even the river slows herself with her arms of wavelets, then stands quite still – as if she wants the touch of the golden dust from his feet, which blows in the wind.

Gopis! Surrounded by his friends, who sing his praises, and showing his immortal splendour, as of the Brahman, Krishna roams the jungle, calling to his cows that have strayed, with his flute. And with their burdens of flowers and fruit, the trees of the Vrindavana bend their crowns, the creepers sway down to him, in adoration and salutation. They burst out in fresh outthrusts of tender leaves, and spray sweet nectar over him, knowing that he is God himself come as a man.

Wearing the fine vermilion tilaka on his brow, Krishna plays his flute song to the drunken, droning bees that swarm to the tulasi leaves he wears upon his garland. Drawn by that awesome music, water birds, sarasa and hamsa, stork and swan, and every other bird on the river and the lakes come away from the water and stand around him, perfectly still and with their eyes shut – like meditating hermits.

With Balarama at his side, both wearing flowers in their ears and upon their bodies, Krishna climbs the mountain, and from a summit or a deep valley, they, the masters of eternal bliss, fill the universe with the Godly song of their flutes. Then, my beauties of Vraja, for fear of showing disrespect, the passing cloud stops its thundering, and rumbles softly, instead, in tune with the music. The cloud spreads itself like an umbrella over the brothers and sprays them with a fine rain, as of ethereal flowers. The cloud is like a friend of Krishna's – they both have the same complexion.'

Yasodha now joined the other women, and they sang to her. 'Mother Yasodha! Your son is a master of all the games the gopa boys play in the forest. Yet when he raises his flute to his lips and plays a song that no one has taught him, Indra, Parameshwara and Sivaa crane to hear his songs. They, the greatest of all experts in music, shake their heads in wonder, for they cannot fathom the essences or variations of his mandra, madhyama or taara. Besides, they are spellbound by the beauty of his playing.

When Krishna walks upon the earth in Vraja, like a king elephant, healing her pain with his flute song and the touch of his sacred feet, which bear the marks of the banner, the thunderbolt, the lotus and the goad, we watch him, listen to his song, and stand rooted like trees. Our eyes never leave his face and a storm of desire blows through us, so we hardly know when our tresses fell loose or our clothes began to slip away from our bodies.

Often, when he counts his cows using the beads he wears round his neck, beside the tulasi garland whose scent he so loves, he plays on his flute, leaning on a friend's shoulder. Then, the does of the forest – mates of the black antelope – come running to him, their hearts captivated by his songs. They follow Krishna, ocean of virtues, blindly, forsaking, forgetting their homes and mates, just as we gopis do, helplessly.

Holy, sinless Yasodha, your son and Nanda's sports on the banks of the Yamuna, wearing colourful wreaths of kunda flowers. He spends his time with his gopa companions and the herd, playing and cracking jokes with them. The southern breeze blows for him then, softly, laden with the scent of sandalwood, offering him worship with its cool caress. Troupes of Gandharvas and Vidyadharas arrive there to be his minstrels and bards. They wait on him, adoring him with their songs and music, with flowers and other offerings.

Look! Here he comes, at eventide, Devaki's son like a full moon, with the herd that so loves him because he held up the mountain to save them from the great storm. His garlands are coated with dust blown up by the hooves of the cows, and he seems a little tired. But, ah, he is a feast for the eyes of those that see him, and comes to answer the prayers of his bhaktas.

So brilliant in his vanamala, his friends joyful to be with him, here comes the lord of the Yadavas, Krishna, like the cool moon risen to be balm to the anguish of the people of Vraja – of the long day of having been without him. Look how his eyes roll and flash in the intoxication of inner bliss. His face is flushed like a badra fruit, his cheeks glimmer with the light of his golden earrings, and he walks like a lordly elephant.'

O Rajan, thus during the long days, the noble gopis comforted one another and even rejoiced, singing about the one they so loved. Their minds absorbed in Krishna, they felt the ecstasy of being near him."

KAMSA'S RESOLVE

SRI SUKA SAID, “NOW ANOTHER WEIRD AND POWERFUL ASURA ARRIVED in Gokula – Arishta the bull. Huge were his body and his hump. The Earth shook where he trod and he furrowed her with his great, interminable horns.

Bellowing like hell itself he came, denting the ground with his immense hooves, breaking off chunks of rock from the hills. When he reached Gokula he stood pawing the earth, spraying a little urine here and dropping a little dung there, staring wildly out of bloodshot eyes. So terrible was his bellowing that pregnant gopis and cows aborted their foetuses in panic. Clouds nested upon his twin humps, mistaking them for mountains.

The gopas looked at his horns like massive curved swords, and they trembled. The herd saw him, stampeded out of their pens, and fled for the river and the forest.

‘Krishna!’ cried the gopas and gopis. ‘Krishna, save us!’ they screamed, and they ran in frenzy from Vraja. Krishna heard them, saw them flee and he came out calmly, calling to his people not to fear.

He said mockingly to the monstrous Arishta, ‘Why are you frightening the gopas and the cows, foolish one? Don’t you know, wretch, that I have come to quell the arrogance of evil ones like you? Come, fight me if you dare!’

And the Avatara stood coolly facing the demon bull, with one dark arm draped languidly round the shoulders of one of his friends, the poor gopa boy’s knees knocking. Krishna clapped his hands like a clap of thunder, taunting the Asura, provoking him.

With a dreadful bellow, Arishta rushed at Krishna like Indra's Vajra striking, rending the earth with his hooves and scattering the clouds in the sky with his upraised tail. The immense bull demon came right up to Krishna, before he stopped and fixed a baleful downward gaze on the Avatara.

Krishna darted forward, seized the demon's horns and, in a wink, pushed him back eighteen paces. They were like two great tuskers duelling in a forest. Arishta fell back on his haunches.

But the demon bull was up again in a moment, and, his skin wet with sweat, snorting echoing long breaths, Arishta charged Krishna. Krishna stood his ground against the Asura, and took him by the horns, stopping him in his mighty tracks. With a twist of his hands, he flung the awesome bull down, and trampled on him as if he wrung a wet cloth. He pulled out one horn and, with a few strokes, beat the demon to death with it in a red flash.

Arishta lay helpless, bellowing piteously, vomiting blood, his dung flowing, his tree-like legs threshing the air and his eyes rolling in pain and terror. Quickly his spirit left his body and sought the land of Yama. Now the celebrant Devas flung a bright rain of flowers down upon the triumphant Krishna. They sang the praises of Hari, who destroys the sorrows of his bhaktas.

Having killed Arishta, Krishna brought the gopas and their herd back into Vraja. He came with Balarama beside him, and as always, they were a treat for the eyes of the gopis!

Soon after the death of the bull demon, Devarishi Narada arrived in Mathura, in Kamsa's court, and said to that king, 'Do you know that Devaki's eighth-born child is actually growing up as the gopi Yasodha's son Krishna, while the girl child that you believed to be the eighth was in fact Yasodha's daughter? Krishna's brother Balarama, who passes as Nanda's boy, is in truth Vasudeva's son by Rohini. For fear of you they have been given to Nanda to raise. These two have killed so many of your friends and allies, men, women and demons, in the open.'

Kamsa's lips throbbed, his face turned white with anger. He drew his sword, meaning to cut Vasudeva's head off, but Narada prevented him.

After the Rishi, Brahma's wandering son, left Mathura, Kamsa had Vasudeva and Devaki bound in chains – he had not forgotten the prophecy that Devaki's eighth son would kill him.

Kamsa summoned another demon, Kesin, and said, 'Nanda Gopa's sons Rama and Krishna are our mortal enemies. Go, friend, to Vrindavana and rid us of them.'

When Kesin had left, Kamsa, lord of the Bhojas, called a council of his most trusted ministers and warriors – Mushtika, Chanura, Sala, Tosala, and others that were the keepers of his royal elephants.

First, he said to Chanura and Mushtika, 'Great wrestlers and fighters, Chanura, Mushtika, all of you, listen to me closely, hear this news. Narada said to me that in Vraja, where Nanda is the chieftain of the gopas, two sons of Vasudeva called Rama and Krishna live. A prophecy says that my death is written at the hands of these two.

I mean to fetch the cowherd boys here, to wrestle in Mathura with you; and you shall kill them during the wrestling. Tell our workmen to erect tall galleries and stands around our wrestling arena. I will invite all the people of our city and our villages to watch the wrestling.

As for you, O my master of elephants, prepare the tusker Kuvalayapida when the rut flows from his temples. When the cowherd boys arrive at the gates to the wrestling stadium, loose him on them, with an iron bar in his trunk. Let him strike them, trample them, and you will not have to wrestle at all.

Also, on the fourteenth day of the month that is sacred to the Lord Siva, commence a bow ceremony in his name. Sacrifice such beasts as are allowed to Pasupati, the ready granter of boons.'

But the master of his elephants seemed alarmed. The man protested, 'How can I kill the two sons of your majesty, the lord of the earth's sister?'

Now Kamsa spoke to all those that he had called. 'Listen carefully to me, for there should be no vacillation in carrying out my command. I am going to divulge something to you, to tell you why from the very beginning I have been an enemy of these Yadavas, though they are my kinsmen.

Once, in her youth, my lovely mother had just finished her monthly period, and was wandering through the palace garden, where a fine cool breeze blew. It was spring, and in that garden stood the handsomest asoka, bakula, saala, and punnaga trees, all in rich bloom, with swarms of black bees humming over their flowers.

Those bright groves echoed with the songs of koyals, and peacocks danced with fans unfurled beneath them to adore the spring. Troops of monkeys played in the branches, and the place was alive with the season of love.

My mother, the queen, had been away from her husband for a week. She had just bathed after her period, and now she thought of the king Ugrasena and her mind was swept by desire. She yearned for him, for his tender and virile lovemaking.

Just then, a Gandharva called Drumila passed invisibly through that garden. He saw the queen, and being able to read the minds of mortals, as all his kind are, Drumila saw the mood she was in.

The Gandharva saw that my mother Pavanrekha was young and beautiful, and he was smitten by her. In a flash, as his kind can, he assumed the form of Ugrasena. He looked exactly like the king; he spoke and smiled like him.

My mother, of course, was waiting eagerly for her husband and she did not suspect for a moment that this was not her Ugrasena who laid her down in some soft grass under an excellent punnaga tree. He wasted no time in making love to her.

It was during the act, for its unearthly power and intensity, that she realised her lover was not Ugrasena. Too late, and she was swept away by a vertiginous climax, before she pushed the Gandharva away, and rose panting.

Now Drumila had back his own dazzling form; he was much taller and more splendid than any human. My distraught mother cried, "Who are you, wretched cheat? What have you done to me?"

Languidly, Drumila said, "I am a Gandharva, noble queen. We are celestials, attendants of Indra's Devas. You must know that human women hardly ever come to lie with us, but only with mortal men who, unlike us, are subject to disease, age and death. Surely, now you know the difference between love with a human man and with an immortal! Lovely one…"

She interrupted him angrily, "You want me to be pleased, after the sly crime you have committed on me? You have defied the Gods that rule water, fire, earth, air, akasa, the sun and the moon. You have ignored the Lokapalas, Kaala, the dawn, the dusk and sacred dharma.

You have behaved as a rut-maddened elephant does, when his temples flow ichor and he is crazed with lust. Vile Gandharva, I was as pure as a clear lotus pool in a forest's heart, but you have sullied me forever. And now you want me to be pleased for having sinned with you?"

Drumila was afraid of her wrath, and murmured, "Sweet woman, love between an immortal male and a human woman is allowed by the Shastras; it is only forbidden between an immortal woman and a mortal man. Ah queen, who smell as sweet as a lotus, I have not sinned. Besides, my seed shall bear fruit in you and you will have my son. He will be wealthy, intelligent, vigorous and daring. What I say shall not prove false."

But she was stricken at having lost her chastity, and cried, "You have broken the bounds of dharma. You are a sinner, an adharmi, and your son will be cruel and criminal. He will have no virtue in him, and he will never have the blessings of the Brahmanas or the Rishis."

Drumila was terrified that she would curse him next. Hastily, he said, "My son will be the mortal enemy of your clan!" and he vanished like stardust before her eyes.

When he had gone, my mother returned sadly from the garden to the palace, and her life had changed forever. Nobody else knew what had happened. In time, she found she was pregnant and gave birth to me, Kamsa.

However, there was one omniscient Sage who knew, with the mystic sight with which he was endowed, all that transpired in that scented garden. Narada Muni, who is my friend, told me the story of my birth. Since the day he did, I have despised all my mother's clan – the scheming, haughty Yadavas. You know how they, too, detest me.

Since I am a Gandharva's son, I will hardly sin if I kill my old enemy Ugrasena, his brother Devaka, the cunning Vasudeva, and all their partisans. So I say to you again, dear friends, kill Krishna and Balarama without a second thought, without mercy.

I mean to worship the Lord Yama by offering him the lives of the two youths, the sons of Vasudeva, by having them crushed by the mighty Kuvalayapida. Let Vasudeva, Ugrasena, Devaka and Nanda watch the boys die, and let their eyes flow bitter tears, before we send them also after their precious wards.'

Thus, the king plotted a threefold attack upon Balarama and Krishna, and planned to worship Siva so he would prevail against the brothers, notwithstanding the boon.

Kamsa was no novice in the arts of cunning diplomacy. He now called for Akrura, a prominent Yadava. Taking his hand, this evil sovereign said to Akrura, 'Dear Akrura, I have a mission for you that only an intimate friend can accomplish. There is no one among the Bhojas and the Vrishnis to match you for humility or the goodness and generosity of your heart.

Gentle Akrura, even as Indra achieves his most difficult purposes by depending on Vishnu, I depend on you for my most vital ends. I beg you, go to Nanda Gopa's Vraja, where Vasudeva's sons Rama and Krishna dwell. You must fetch them to Mathura immediately in your chariot.

With Mahavishnu's help, the Devas had plotted my death through Rama and Krishna. You must bring them to me, along with Nanda and his gopas, carrying tribute to me. When they arrive, I will have them trampled by Kuvalayapida, my elephant who is the very image of Yama.

If somehow they elude death by the feet and the tusks of my elephant, my wrestlers, quick as lightning and dreadful as thunder, will kill them for me. Once the youths are dead, it will be easy enough to finish Vasudeva and have the treacherous Vrishnis killed, and Nanda and his cowherds.

When this is done, Akrura, I mean to finally have my father Ugrasena put to the sword – for though he is old, he still craves the throne. I will have Ugrasena's brother Devaka and the others that are still loyal to these two, and are my enemies, killed.

Dear, dear Akrura, once this has been accomplished, our kingdom will be purged of all our enemies within. Well, even if some remain, they will not dare so much as raise a whisper against me: for my father-in-law, the awesome Jarasandha, and my mighty friend Dwividha support me.

I have other sworn friends and allies, fearsome and powerful – Sambara, Narakasura, Bana, and many others that all men dread. With them beside me, I will crush every kshatriya king who is loyal to the Devas, and rule the earth.

Now you understand, Akrura my friend, what I intend. All I ask of you is to go to Gokula and bring the gopa boys Rama and Krishna to Mathura for the Dhanuryagna, the bow sacrifice, which is not far from today. Ask them to come and enjoy the marvellous sights of our ancient city.'

Akrura replied, 'My king, there is nothing amiss with your resolve to defend yourself against the threat to your life. Yet you must learn to be even-minded in success and failure, for it is unseen fate that finally bestows loss or gain, success or failure.

Men often make their plans without taking providence into their calculations, and they come to grief – stricken equally by joy, when they find success, and by sorrow when they fail. But I shall go forth and do as you say.'

Having issued his commands, Kamsa returned to his royal apartment, and Akrura went back to his home."

THE SLAYING OF KESIN AND VYOMASURA

SRI SUKA SAID, "THE DEMON KESIN, KAMSA'S ALLY, ARRIVED IN GOKULA as an immense stallion. He came, furrowing the earth with his hooves and scattering the clouds in the sky with his mane. His terrific neighing struck fear across his path.

His eyes staring and darting here and there, his mouth wide as a cave, his neck thick as ten tree-trunks, his skin blue as rainclouds, and his mind charged with evil, came that Asura, bent on doing Kamsa's will. Nanda and his gopas saw him and they trembled.

His awful neighing was more like a ceaseless roaring. He swished his tail and the clouds in the sky fled. His gaze roved wildly over the cowherd settlement, seeking out the one he had come to kill. Then Krishna appeared before him and beckoned to the horse demon, which responded with a roar more shattering than any before – a lion's roar.

His mouth yawning so it seemed he meant to swallow the sky, Kesin charged Krishna. Then, stopping in a flash, he turned his back on the Avatara and lashed out at him with his mighty hind legs.

Krishna ducked under the lightning kick, under hooves like swords, and quick as a thought, he seized Kesin by those legs. Casually, with a God's strength, he began to whirl the massive stallion round in the air and flung him a hundred bowlengths, as Garuda might a serpent he catches. Now Krishna waited, nonchalant as ever.

In a moment, Kesin regained consciousness. Shaking his long head to clear it, he jumped up and galloped at the Avatara once more. The demon stallion opened his mouth wide again. Smiling, calm, Krishna thrust his arm into the surprised Asura's maw, like a snake does its body into a hole.

Roaring, Kesin bit down on that arm, but his great teeth flew out as if Krishna's arm was made of red-hot iron. The blue horse stopped in his tracks, and now the Lord's arm grew disconcertingly in Kesin's mouth, like some neglected disease. Krishna arm grew thick as a tree, and the monstrous horse choked on it.

Krishna kept his arm thrust down the stallion's throat. Kesin fell on the ground, threshed about, growling hideously, and kicking his legs. He could not breathe and his body dripped sweat, his eyes rolled in pain and panic, and his anus sprayed excrement. In a moment, life left the equine form, and Kesin grew still.

Casually, Krishna drew his arm out of the dead demon's body, which had burst open in many places just like a ripe cucumber. No trace of pride touched the triumphant Avatara's face or his heart, though the Devas sang his praises from the sky and once more poured down heaven's rarest blooms over him.

O Rajan, now Devarishi Narada arrived in Vraja and met with Krishna, alone. The divine Sage said to him in secret, 'O Krishna, Krishna! You are the Lord – immeasurable, inconceivable, who has manifested here as the leader of the Sattvatas.

You are the single Spirit that dwells in every being, as one fire does in all fuel. You are the invisible witness, the indweller in every heart. You are the Supreme One, who controls the universe, the master of us all.

You, whose will is always done, create, sustain and withdraw this universe of Prakriti, of the three gunas, with your maya shakti of utmost mystery. You ever remain beyond creation, support and destruction – you that depend only upon yourself, who are founded only in yourself.

You have incarnated yourself to rid the Earth of demons born in human form, and as kshatriya kings. You have come to save those that follow dharma; you have come to rescue dharma itself from the Asuras and Rakshasas.

How wonderful, Lord, it was to watch you despatch Kesin the stallion, whose roars made the Devas – whose eyes are lidless, and who never blink – flee their Swarga in terror.

In days to come, I shall see more wonders – you will kill Chanura, Mushtika, and the other wrestlers of Mathura. You will slay the elephant Kuvalayapida, and your demonic uncle Kamsa.

Yes, I will see you rid the world of Panchajana, the demon of the conch, Yavana, Mura, Naraka, and so many others. I will watch you in joy, Krishna, when you uproot the Parijata from Indra's garden after vanquishing the Deva king, and bring the tree of wishes down into this world.

Ah, my Lord, I long for the days when you will take several noble wives, daughters of great kshatriyas all, offering deeds of incredible valour as dowry. I will see you save the cursed king of old in Dwaraka – Nriga who turned into a chameleon an age ago, and awaits your touch to be released from his curse.

I will see you take the wild and lovely Jambavati as your wife, when you go forth to retrieve the priceless Symantaka, gemstone of the Sun. I will witness the miracle of your fetching the brahmana's dead children back from Vaikuntha.

Then my eyes will see you kill Paundraka of Karusha, the false Vaasudeva, and burn the city of Kasi. I will watch you kill Dantavakra, and Sishupala during the Rajasuya yagna of your cousins the Pandavas.

All your deeds of glory, worthy of being sung, I shall be witness to, in Dwaraka of the sea. Then, upon the momentous field of Samatapanchaka, field of the Kurus, Kurukshetra, I will see you, O Kaalatman, Spirit of time, become Parthasarathy, Arjuna's charioteer. You, who have come to make the earth's burden of evil lighter, will make the third Pandava your instrument, during the Great War. Vast armies you will raze through him – of the Pandavas and Kauravas, both.

Ah, I seek refuge in you, who are the essence of pure consciousness. You are always absorbed in your universal Atman, and you have nothing external to gain. Your Spirit is immaculate, infinite, eternal, and immutable; you transcend maya, and everything that is a part of change and becoming.

I salute you, Lord of all, who are perfectly sufficient unto yourself, but have embodied yourself as the leader of the Yadavas, to fulfil your divine sport!'

Thus Narada hymned Krishna, and the Sage prostrated many times at the feet of the Incarnation. Then, with Krishna's leave, Brahma's wanderer son, greatest of Vishnubhaktas, left Gokula, in transport that he had seen his Lord's Avatara face to face.

Krishna continued living among the gopas, who were jubilant after the manner in which he slew Kesin, and he tended the herd he loved so much. One day, he and his friends were out at pasture, upon a tableland high on the mountain, and they were at a game of hide and seek.

Some of them acted as shepherds, some as thieves, and yet others were the sheep, which were to be lifted. So busy were they at their game, that they never noticed danger approach them.

The great Mayaa's son, Vyomasura, used his powers of sorcery to assume the form of a gopa, and joined the game. During the game, he stealthily kidnapped several gopa boys that played as sheep and goats.

One by one, Vyoma spirited them away to a cave, and sealed them in by blocking the cavemouth with a boulder. Soon just five or six gopa boys remained outside the cave. When Krishna realised what was happening, he seized the demon like a lion would a thieving jackal.

Instantly, the Asura resumed his real form – big as a hill. Krishna held him firm. Struggle as he did, Vyoma could not escape. Krishna flung him down on the ground and choked him to death, as yagnapasus are killed during a sacrifice.

When the monster was dead, Krishna came to the cave, smashed the boulder with a blow of his fist, and let his friends out into the sun again."

AKRURA COMES TO GOKULA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "AKRURA HARDLY SLEPT FOR EXCITEMENT ON the night after Kamsa ordered him to go to Gokula, and bring Krishna and Balarama to Mathura. Early next morning, he set out in his chariot for Nanda's cowherd settlement on the fringes of Vrindavana.

As he went along, the noble Akrura felt an unprecedented tide of bhakti surge in his heart. He thought, 'What great punya I must have done, what huge tapasya, what charity to brahmanas – that I am to have the incalculable fortune of seeing Keshava today!

Ordinarily, to see the Lord himself would be impossible for me, for my mind is worldly, and addicted to every sensual pleasure. Why, it would be as impossible for me to see the Lord as for a sudra to recite the Veda.

But no! Unworthy and degenerate as I am, I am going to see God today. Numberless souls flow helplessly down the great stream of time. A chosen few, very few, manage to ford the stream, and find the far shore, helped by some unexpected, inexplicable providence. So, too, the Lord's grace makes the impossible happen.

Today all my sins have been forgiven me, and my being born into the world has found fruition. My life shall soon be complete, fulfilled. For soon, I will, in truth, prostrate myself at the lotus-feet of God, upon which the most evolved Yogis meditate.

Why, today Kamsa, who does not know the meaning of charity, has done me the greatest favour that anyone ever could. He has given me the chance to lay myself at the feet of Hari, the light from whose toenails has dispelled the darkness of ignorance from the hearts of Mahatmas of the past.

Brahma, Maheswara and Sri Devi have worshipped those sacred feet, as have the Rishis and all the finest bhaktas. Those same feet, tinted with saffron from the breasts of the gopi women, now walk upon the earth of Vrindavana – as Krishna roams the forest with his companions and their herd.

Not long now before I see his face haloed by rich black hair, its cheekbones fine, and its nose, its mouth always smiling, and the eyes like red lotuses! See, Akrura, how the wild deer move round you in pradakshina – an omen that some wonderful fortune is about to befall you.

Surely, my eyes shall find their highest satisfaction if they alight upon the human form of Vishnu, the boundless source of beauty – the form he has taken to relieve the Earth of her burden of evil, the burden she has borne too long.

He has no sense of ahamkara. He is the detached witness of the universe of causes and effects. He scatters the ignorant dark, and its experience of duality, with the light of his eternal knowledge. This is he who has taken a body and form that appear human, him that we see under the trees of Vrindavana, among the lovely gopikas in their homes.

Legends that describe his qualities, his exploits and incarnations destroy the sins of the world, and bless those that recount and listen to them. They rejuvenate and purify the Earth, make her beautiful, and sanctify her. Tales that do not tell of him are like adornments on a corpse – lifeless.

He has been born now into the clan of the Sattvatas so he can help the cause of the Devas, whom he has appointed to preserve dharma and varnasrama in this world, the law he has created. He dwells among the gopas of Vraja, while his fame spreads on every side, and the Gods sing the glory of his awesome deeds – the fame and glory that are blessings to all creatures.

Since the sun rose today, I have seen nothing but auspicious omens. Surely, surely, I will see him before the sun sets – he who is the goal of all noble souls, who is the Father of the world, who illumines and brings joy to creation, whom all that are blessed with sight want to see, who is the abode of Sri Lakshmi, the focus of her every aspiration, and the sanctuary and the Guru of all the Rishis.

As soon as I see them, I will leap down from my chariot and prostrate myself at the feet of Krishna and Balarama, the two masters of the universe, the Pradhana Purushas, the Foremost Persons – their feet of which the greatest Yogis can only conceive in dhyana. I will pay homage to their gopa companions, and to all that dwell in Vraja, all of them so blessed!

And when I lie at his feet, won't the Infinite One place his sacred hands upon my head – the hands that give sanctuary to those that flee to him out of their fear of the serpent time, which flies at them at terrifying speed?

Indra and Mahabali gave some small offerings into those hands, and they had sovereignty over the three worlds. Those hands, that are fragrant as the saugandhika, released the gopis of Vrindavana from their weary grief, and brought them the highest bliss, when they touched the gypsy women during the Raasa Lila.

I am going to Vraja as Kamsa's messenger, but Krishna will not regard me with enmity. For he is the one that dwells in all our hearts, and he sees everything, within and without. Let him only smile at me, when I lie at his feet, and I will find supreme ecstasy from his look like a shower of amrita.

All my sins will leave me, all my doubts, and I shall be redeemed in eternal joy! Why, my body will become a sacred tirtha, my shackles of karma riven, when Krishna clasps me in his powerful arms as his dearest friend, his kinsman, and his absolute devotee.

When he calls my name, saying 'Akrura', as I stand before him with folded hands, bowing low after he embraces me, my birth as a man will find fulfilment and its final meaning. No, he has no friends or enemies; he is God, and all souls are alike to him. Yet it is true that he blesses each bhakta according to the manner in which each one worships him. He is like the kalpaka tree, which yields the individual wishes of those that rest beneath it.

Then Balarama will hug me, too, with a smile. He will take my hand, and lead me to their home, where they will feed me, and gently ask what dreadful Kamsa is plotting against his own.'

Lost in these thoughts of Krishna, Akrura, son of Svaphalka, rode absently along, and suddenly found himself in Gokula, just as the sun was setting. He saw, as if with a mystic's vision, Krishna's footprints on the outskirts of Vraja. They were uncannily luminous – the marks of those holy feet, distinct with the signs of the lotus, the barley grain, and the hook, the feet that receive the worship of the crowned heads of all the Devas.

Akrura quivered with excitement. His hair stood on end; he was overwhelmed by bhakti, so tears streamed down his face. He leaped down from his chariot, and cried, 'The padadhuli of my Lord! The dust from Krishna's sacred feet!' That kshatriya fell on the ground and, as one possessed, began to roll about in that dust.

Rajan, what happened to the noble Akrura when he arrived in Gokula with Kamsa's cunning message – the experience of mystical rapture at the very sight of the signs of God, or the vanishment of fear, insecurity, and sorrow, at hearing his divine names – is surely the highest attainment of any mortal, the final purushartha, meaning and purpose of existence.

Akrura rose, climbed into his chariot again and rode on. Then he saw Rama and Krishna in the milking stalls. They wore bright yellow and blue robes, and their great eyes were like the petals of a blooming lotus in autumn.

Akrura saw how youthful they were – kishora – even boyish still, one dark blue and the other fair, the dark one's breast adorned with the Srivatsa, in which the Devi Lakshmi dwells. He saw how powerful their long arms were, how handsome their faces, how reverberant their presences, how noble, wild and fearless their spirits – as of two young bull elephants.

Yes, that lord of gifts from Mathura saw the Godly brothers, whose feet bore the marks of the flag and the thunderbolt, the lotus, the goad and the rest, feet that blessed the earth of Gokula. Their smiles spread love, joy and mercy all around them.

They had just bathed, and wore sandalwood paste, fresh clothes, vanamalas of wildflowers, and pearl necklaces. Their movements were both sublime and playful. Akrura saw them as the Lord himself, the Original One, Pradhana and Purusha, the first cause, the final sovereign, who had been born to save the world, to bless it.

Rama and Krishna were two mountains of presence – one of silver, the other of deep emerald, both chased in gold, lighting up the four quarters with their unearthly lambency. Akrura saw them, and did indeed leap down from his chariot. His skin crawled for excitement, all the hair on his body stood on end, tears flowed unbidden down his face, and in that surge of bhakti he flung himself at their feet. He was speechless, and could not announce himself, tell them who he was.

Krishna, who knew all things, raised him up lovingly, and clasped him in his mighty arms that bore the marks of the Sudarshana chakra. Then Balarama embraced Akrura, and exactly as the nobleman from Mathura had imagined, took his hand and led him to their dwelling, Krishna going with them.

How welcome they made him feel; in such love they enfolded him. They made him sit in the finest chair, and washed his feet, before offering him madhurparka – honey mixed in clarified butter, and curd.

They made him the gift of a fine milch cow, and, ignoring his protests, Krishna, the Lord himself, massaged Akrura limbs, which were stiff and weary after his long journey. When he had rested thus a while, they served him a meal of many exotic and delicious dishes.

Balarama seemed to be expert in the delicate customs of hospitality; when Akrura had eaten his fill, Rama brought out some betel leaves, sandalwood paste, and garlands of the sweetest smelling flowers. Akrura glowed with pleasure at all this.

When they sat together, listening to the night that had fallen upon the jungle outside, Nanda said to Akrura, 'O Daasaarha, most distinguished among Yadavas, tell me how the Yadus manage to live under the savage yoke of Kamsa? Your life can be no better than of a sheep tended by a butcher. What shall I ask about the subjects of a king, who finds his great pleasure in murder, who slaughtered the babies of his own weeping sister?'

Akrura heard this, and indeed being out here with the loving gopas, who had welcomed him so warmly, took the fatigue from his journey away from him, as if magically."

DEPARTURE FOR MATHURA

SRI SUKA SAID, "SURELY, WHEN RAMA AND KRISHNA HAD WELCOMED him so fondly, and when he reclined upon an easy chair in their home, Akrura felt that every part of his reverie on his way here had come true. What cannot be attained by a bhakta of the Lord, in whom the Devi Lakshmi resides? Yet, Rajan, the bhakta does not hanker after anything!

So after they had dined, Krishna, too, spoke privately with Akrura about the plight of his clansmen, the Yadavas, and about Akrura's mission.

Said the Lord, 'Dear Akrura, precious friend, we hope your journey was a pleasant one. Is all our family well? Yet as long as my renowned uncle Kamsa lives, there can hardly be any point in asking after my kinsmen.'

He sighed, 'Nothing makes me sadder than to know that our parents have suffered so much on our account. Kamsa incarcerated them, and they watched him slaughter their infant children. But dearest Akrura, for so long I have yearned to meet you, my kinsman, and today at last my wish has come true. So tell me now, the real purpose of your visit to Gokula.'

When Krishna asked him this, Akrura, scion of the clan of Madhu, told him about Kamsa's enmity towards the Yadavas, and his attempt to kill Vasudeva in anger. He told the Avatara how Narada Muni came to Mathura and told Kamsa that Krishna was Vasudeva's son, and not Nanda's.

Akrura told all about his own mission, on which Kamsa had sent him – to fetch the brothers to Mathura, to have them killed. When he finished, grimly, Rama and Krishna looked at each other and burst out laughing. They went to Nanda, and told him of the king's invitation to attend the festival of Siva's bow.

Nanda asked his gopas to collect milk, butter, curd, and ghee to take as gifts to the king, and to hitch their carts for the long ride to Mathura. He said, 'Tomorrow, we leave for Kamsa's city, bringing fresh milk and butter for the king. We shall attend the sacred bow festival, and it seems that all the kingdom will be there.'

When the gopis, to whom Krishna was as their very prana, heard that Akrura had come to take Krishna and Rama to Mathura, grief gripped them violently. Some turned white as sheets, others could not stop sighing, while palpitations convulsed their hearts and their breasts heaved wildly. Hardly knowing what they did, others let their hair fall loose, and tore away their clothes and ornaments like madwomen.

Some of the women were so overcome they lapsed into deep stillness, dhyana, their hearts and minds absorbed in a single thought – Krishna. Even as Rishis in samadhi lose consciousness of their bodies, and unite with the Atman, so did these women become mystically one with Krishna.

Some gopis swooned, to think of his smile, his sweet love talk, and that he was leaving them. They thought of him gone, and shivered with strange terror, with grief – that no more would they see his languid, beautiful walk, his dazzling smile, his beauty, his ready humour, his laugh, his loving, and his tremendous deeds.

They gathered in a throng at his door, their tears flowing, and they lamented to him. Those gopis said piteously, '*Aho vidhaatastava na kvachid dayaa sanyojya maitreyaa pranayena dehinah; taamshravaakritaarthaan viyunadkshayapaarthakam vikreeditam terbhakacheshtatam yatha...*

Ah Lord, have you not an iota of mercy that you forge such bonds of friendship and love between us, your creatures, and then rend them savagely apart before they bear proper fruit? What you do, it seems, is mere juvenile play, meaningless and irresponsible.

You gave us the matchless dark face of Krishna, framed by a mass of black curls, his high, strong nose, his fine, powerful bones, and his smile that scattered our grief and fetched joy and courage. And now, O God, you mean to snatch him from us, so we will never see him again.

Lord, you are terribly cruel, and you have come to Gokula in the guise of this kshatriya called Akrura, whose very name means one who is without cruelty! False, deceiving Lord, Krishna is the very vision of our eyes, and now you mean to take our sight from us.

We looked at him – any part of him, any limb – and we knew how awesome and beautiful your creation was. What will we do when he leaves; of what use will our eyes be to us?

Alas, alas! The friendship of Nanda's son is false and fleeting. He is so taken up by the thought of new friends that he does not deign to favour us with even a glance. Ah, he enchanted us, toyed with us, and we openly became his slaves, forsaking our homes, our husbands and sons, our families. But his affections are like a passing shower, and he is surely after the novelty of new love.

Fortunate are the women of Mathura! Theirs shall be the happiest morning, when all their punya will bear the richest fruit. Tomorrow, the Lord of Vraja will ride into their city, and they will drink deeply of the sight of his face, the heady wine of his smiles, made so potent by his sidelong glances at them.

Certainly, Krishna might be noble-minded, and he might well love and revere his father and mother. But these will not bring him back to us poor country wenches. The honeyed, breathy talk of the sophisticated women of Mathura will capture his heart, their shy and coquettish looks, their amorous ways.

Indeed, tomorrow there shall be a great feast for the eyes of all the Yadava clans – the Daasaarhas, the Bhojas, Andhakas, the Vrishnis and the Sattvatas – and for all those that see Devaki's son, Lakshmi Devi's consort, our magnificent Krishna passing them in his chariot along the road to Mathura.

Akrura should never be the name of this man who has come to take our Krishna, dearer than our lives, away from us – he is far from gentle, he is cruelty itself. He will take our love away beyond all the paths we know, to a faraway land, leaving us behind, with no word of mercy or consolation. This fellow is ruthlessness personified, and we drown in grief.

Oh look! Without the least compunction, hard-hearted Krishna climbs into the chariot, smiling. The haughty gopas rush to set out in their carts, and follow him to Mathura. This is our blackest day, and fate and God have turned against us.

The elders of Vraja do nothing to prevent this, so let us run and stop him. There is nothing to be afraid of, for what can these elders do to us that is worse than being parted forever from Krishna, when the pain of a few moments without him is so excruciating. Why, even death is not fearful when compared to a life without him.

How will we endure the torment of being parted from him, which is inevitable? We are the gopikas that lost our wits to the extent that the many nights we spent in Vrindavana with him in the Raasa Lila seemed like a moment. We were lost in his touch, his smile, his sweet talk, his games, and his embraces.

Ah, when he comes home to Vraja at dusk, surrounded by his friends, his brother beside him, how our hearts flew out to him. He would come dancing in, piping on his flute, his hair caked in the white dust the herd raised. Oh, how will we live without him?'

The gopikas lost all sense of modesty; they suffered so much at the very thought of being separated from Krishna. In their pain, they cried out to him, shamelessly, unmindful of who heard them, 'O Govinda! Sweet Damodara, O my Madhava!' They called him by all his names, wailing, beating their breasts.

This had gone on through the night, and at daybreak the women watched helplessly as, after the morning sandhya worship, Akrura set his chariot on the road to Mathura, with Krishna and Rama in it. Nanda and his gopas followed in their oxcarts, laden with pots of butter, ghee and curds, and other gifts for Kamsa.

The gopis ran blindly behind this train, and then Krishna turned back to smile at them. They felt a wave of comfort wash over their breaking hearts. They ran in front of his chariot, and stopped him. They stood crying there, waiting for him to say something to them. He spoke to them lovingly, and told them he would return very soon, as soon as what he had to do in Mathura was accomplished.

As the chariot and the oxcarts drove away, the gopis stood rooted, gazing after him, like figures in a painting. Their gazes followed that ratha, until its banner vanished over the horizon and the dust its wheels raised was no longer visible. Finally, they lost the wild hope that he might change his mind and turn back, and they went sadly back to their homes.

Then on, those women spent their days and nights always talking together about him, singing softly about his life among them, the demons he killed and all the rest; and their sorrow found some solace in this absorption, for it seemed that he was still with them, at least in their thoughts.

Rajan, going swiftly in Akrura's chariot Rama and Krishna soon arrived on the banks of the Kalindi, river that kills the sins of those that bathe in her. They alighted from the chariot, washed their hands and feet in the crystal flow of the Yamuna, and quenched their thirst with her sweet water. They returned to the chariot waiting under some trees.

Now, at the noontide, Akrura said that he would like to bathe at the ancient and sacred bathing ghat on the river. The brothers said they would wait for him. As he submerged himself in the midnight-blue water, chanting the Gayatri mantra in his mind, suddenly he saw Rama and Krishna before him, under the river, when he was certain that they still sat in his fine chariot.

'How can this be?' Akrura was amazed. 'They are sitting in the chariot, and yet here they are before me! Perhaps they followed me into the water?'

Akrura rose to the surface of the river and looked at his ratha. Balarama and Krishna still sat there, speaking quietly between themselves. Akrura decided that what he had seen beneath the current was an illusion, a figment of his imagination. Again he submerged, and now he saw a divine vision of the Lord.

The nobleman from Mathura saw the awesome Serpent Adisesha; he saw that serpent, Vishnu's rest with a thousand heads, and a thousand crowns, one for each hood. He saw the hosts of heaven, the Devas and all the immortals worshipping that infinite, divine Snake.

Akrura saw Adisesha in a resplendent form, wearing bright blue silk, and his skin as fair as the filament inside a lotus stalk – great he was, as a white mountain with numberless peaks.

Now Akrura saw another Being who sat upon that serpent-bed, which was Adisesha. He saw the Parama Purusha, the Supreme Being Mahavishnu! His skin was blue and as dark as the other's was fair. He wore a blazing yellow robe. He had four long and gracious arms, his eyes were red as a crimson lotus, and he was the very soul of peace.

Indescribably handsome and bewitching was Vishnu's face, smiling and gazing so lovingly. Arched and high were his brows above his perfect nose; and perfect, also, were his ears, his cheeks, and his lips.

Powerful, graceful and long were the arms of the Blue God. His shoulders were high; his breast was illumined by the presence of Sri. His throat was shapely, fluted like a conch-shell; his navel was wide and deep upon his belly, slender as a leaf, and with three delectable folds. Great and thick were his waist and hips, heavy and massive his thighs, tapered like an elephant's trunk. There was perfection in every part of him – his knees, and his ankles.

His feet were lotuses, exquisite toes their petals, lit up by reddish nails and the anklets he wore. He wore a crown without compare anywhere, and similar armlets, bracelets, sparkling with gemstones beyond describing. He wore the sacred thread, the necklace of which there is just one among the stars, through all time, and shimmering anklets and earrings. In one dark hand, he had a luminous, unfading lotus, while the others held the Panchajanya, the Sudarshana and the Kaumodaki. Wide was his breast, and upon it shone the Srivatsa, the brilliant bloodred Kaustubha, and a Vanamala of wildflowers.

Myriad bhaktas hymned him with various stutis. Nanda and Sunanda, his servitors, sang his praises, as did Sanaka and his brother Sages. Brahma and Rudra eulogised him, as did the nine Brahmarishis – Marichi, Atri, Angiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Bhrigu, Vasishta and Daksha.

The greatest Bhagavottamas, the most peerless bhaktas, sang to him – men like Prahlada, Narada, Vasu and others. The Devis adored

Vishnu – Lakshmi, Pushti, Saraswati, Shanti, Kirti, Tushti, Bhu, Oorja, and his own Mayashakti that consist of Vidya and Avidya, knowledge and ignorance, which confer liberation or bondage.

Beneath the river, Akrura had this vision, and sweeping bliss and devotion coursed through his heart. His hair stood on end, his tears flowed with the Kalindi, and staggering out of the water, speechless, he prostrated on the ground before Krishna. When he recovered himself a little, in a quavering voice charged with emotion, he also began to sing hymns to the Blue One."

AKRURA HYMNS KRISHNA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "INSPIRED BY HIS VISION BELOW THE YAMUNA, filled by quiet and deep peace and bliss, Akrura bent his head and said to the Lord of the lotus eyes, *'Nato asmyaham tvaakhilahetuhetum naaraayanam purushamaadyam avyayam; yannabhijaatad aravindakoshaad brahmaaviraaseed yata esha lokah...*

I prostrate before you, who are the first cause of all things, the cause of causes. You are Narayana, the Indweller, First One, beyond change. Brahma, Creator of the stars, was born within the cosmic Lotus that sprouted from your navel. From him, the universe evolved.

All manner of evolution, earth, water, fire, air and sky, and the Intelligence Mahatattva that is their cause, Prakriti and its cause Purusha, the mind, the senses and their objects, and all the Gods that rule over these – you, the Sri Murti, the Supreme Being, are the source of all these. They are but parts of you.

Brahma and the rest never fathom the true nature of you, who are Pure Spirit, the Atman. For even Brahma is swathed by Prakriti and her gunas. He cannot grasp what transcends the gunas.

Men that have attained the highest spiritual perspective worship you with intuition as the Brahman, the One. Others worship you as the Spirit that dwells in the body, in nature, the primordial elements, or in the Gods.

Some brahmanas and kshatriyas follow the karma marga, the path of deeds, and perform sacrifices. They resort to the three Vedas, the Rig, the Saman and the Yajus. Finally they worship only you, who are the soul of all the names and mantras they chant, who are every God invoked in all their hymns and rituals.

Yet others renounce the way of the sacrifice; they abandon karma, and follow the path of gyana, knowledge. They, too, adore you, who are Knowledge embodied, as they perform the gyana yagna.

Some Rishis follow the bhakti marga, which you have laid out in the Paancharaatra Aagama, and other sacred texts. They worship you as the one God who abides in many forms, many vyuhas – as Vaasudeva, Samkarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. They also worship you as the one universal Being, Mahanarayana.

Others, who worship only Siva, adore you by the rituals that the Lord Siva has prescribed in the Saiva Aagamas. These, too have different sects – Kaapaalika, Kaalaamukha, Paasupata, and others too. They all worship only you, O glorious One!

So also, Paramatman, all those that worship other Gods, even while imagining them to be apart from you, in truth worship only you. For all those Devas are only amsas of you. Lord, countless rivers, springing upon different mountains, and swollen by rain from many clouds, finally flow into the same ocean, and become one with that ocean. So also the numberless paths of worship at last flow to the same goal, they lead ultimately just to you.

Sattva, rajas and tamas are attributes of your Prakriti. All creation, from the smallest inanimate object to Brahma the Creator, emerged from these three gunas of Prakriti. They are sustained by the gunas, even as the beads upon a necklace are by its thread, and finally re-absorbed into Prakriti.

I prostrate before you, O infinite One, who are all this creation, sustenance and destruction, yet are unattached and always a witness within the minds of all beings, high and low. The stream of gunas, samsara, pervades and controls Gods, men and beasts; it rules every being and world in creation, but not you who are its fountainhead and its master.

Fire is your face, the Earth your feet; the Sun is your eye, the Sky your navel. The Cardinal Points are your ears, the Cosmos is your head; Indra and his Devas are your arms, the oceans are your belly, and the wind is your vitality.

The trees and green plants are hairs upon your body; the clouds are the locks upon your head. Mountains are your bones and nails, and day and night occur when you blink your eyes. The Lord Brahma is your phallus, and the rain is your semen. This is the Form taught to us, upon which we meditate.

Immortal One, you are the perfect person, the changeless Being, whom only the free mind can grasp. In you, O Spirit of infinite dimensions, all these worlds and galaxies abide, with their teeming life – their countless creatures and the Devas that rule their destinies. They exist as minuscule water beings do – never knowing or touching one another – or like microbes in an udumbara fig.

And you come in different incarnations to all these worlds, to remove the sorrow and suffering of their people. Thus freed into bliss, their sins consumed, they sing of your glory ever after.

I bow to you as the Matsya, the Fish that swam through the cosmic waters of the Pralaya and caused this world to exist. I worship you who came as Hayagriva, the Horse-throated One, who slew the Demons Madhu and Kaitabha.

I salute the Kuurma, the first and awesome Tortoise who bore Mount Mandara upon his shell when the Devas and Asuras churned the ocean for the amrita. I adore you who came as the Varaha, the Boar, and raised the Earth up on your tusks from the bottom of the sea, to save her and return her to where she belonged.

I prostrate before you that came as Narasimha, the Manticore, to save your bhaktas from terror and peril. I salute you who, as Vamana the sacred Dwarf, measured the universe with three strides.

I salute you, O Parasurama, Axe-bearer, chief of the Bhrigus, who desiccated the arrogant kshatriyas of the earth. I bow down to you, O gentle Rama, king of the Raghus, who brought death to the terrible Ravana and his rakshasas.

I worship you, who manifest as the four vyuhas – Vaasudeva, Samkarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. I salute you, who are born as Sri Buddha, the enlightened one, the pure one, who fetches dismay to the powers of darkness, the Daityas and the Danavas.

I bow to you, who will come as Kalki, the Pale Destroyer, who will bring the Pralaya down upon a degenerate world, when every king and ruler is a venal and murderous sinner, and when all the people have turned their backs on the life of the spirit.

Most holy Lord, bound by your maya, the world of living beings turns helplessly round on the wheel of samsara, deluded by ahamkara, and the overmastering consciousness of 'I' and 'mine'. I, too, sweet God, cling to the same fleeting dreams – the body, children, the home, a wife, the family, and other objects of attachment and sensual pleasure.

These prevent me from truly knowing you, who are the only true source of selfless love and joy. For I am blind, and cannot distinguish the ephemeral from the permanent, reality from illusion, the spirit from the body, and what can lead me to bliss from what will plunge me into bondage and suffering. My mind swings between these extremes, pleasure and pain, and is encased in ignorance and darkness. I forget that you are the one that matters, the one most dear to me.

I am like the thirsty fool who finds a tank of water, covered by weeds, then abandons it, running towards a mere mirage. Lord, I have turned my face from you, and attached myself to all that is unreal – my body, its enslaving pleasures, my home, my wealth and family.

Truly, my intellect is feeble and my will weak; I cannot restrain my mind, always stormed by desires. The wild senses and their ceaseless lusts drag me here and there, having their way with my life.

Yes I am a slave to the senses, yet now I can prostrate myself at your holy feet, Krishna, and this is not something that men with minds as impure as mine can often do. It is your grace that makes this possible, despite my being unworthy.

Only the company and service of holy men, the Rishis and Yogis of the world, turns a man's mind towards you. Padmanabha, O God with the lotus growing from your navel, only when a man's time to become free from samsara arrives does your grace fetch such saintly ones into a person's life. From them, he learns bhakti and dhyana.

I bow to you, who are Pure Consciousness, and the source of all knowledge. You are the Brahman, infinite, infinitely powerful, ruler of Kaala, Karma and Prakriti, which rule the fate of all jivas. I bow to you Vaasudeva, soul of all souls; I salute you, Samkarshana, who are the foundation of Ahamkara; I worship you, Pradyumna and Aniruddha, masters of Manas and the Indriyas.

Ah my Lord, bless me and protect me, for I surrender my life to you!' "

IN MATHURA

SRI SUKA SAID, "THUS KRISHNA REVEALED HIS DIVINE FORM TO AKRURA under the water. In moments, he withdrew that form, just as a dancer does a pose. Akrura emerged from the river and hymned Krishna in fervour. This done, he finished his noonday sandhya rituals in haste, then rushed back to the chariot, his skin crawling in amazement.

Smiling faintly, Krishna asked, 'You seem to have seen something extraordinary and wonderful, in the water, on land, or in the sky. What could it be?'

Akrura whispered, 'All that is wonderful in the water, on land, and in the sky exist within you, for you are the universe, you are all existence! When I see you before me, I see everything that exists anywhere. Lord, when I see you, I see all that is wonderful in the water, on land, and in the air.'

Saying this, Akrura, son of Gandini, took his reins and drove his chariot again, slowly, until at dusk he brought Balarama and Krishna to Mathura. O King, people on the way gathered in small crowds to look at the sons of Vasudeva. Seeing them, they stood transfixed, staring, for such joy swept through their hearts.

Nanda and his gopas had taken a short way across the countryside, and arrived in Mathura before Akrura, Balarama and Krishna. They waited for the chariot in a garden on the hem of the city. Krishna now took Akrura's hands fondly, and said with a smile, 'You ride home in your chariot, my lord, and we will follow later, after we have rested here for a while. We will roam the city streets on our own today.'

Tears springing in his eyes, Akrura cried, 'My Lord, I will not enter Mathura without the both of you! Saviour of the world, it does not become you to abandon your bhaktas. Come, Lord, dearest of friends, come to my home with your brother and all the gopas.

Come and bless my humble house, sanctify it with your padadhuli, the golden dust of your feet. Offering water, with which your feet have been washed, appeases the Pitrs, the Agnis and the Devas.

Mahabali washed your feet, and he found immortal fame, and became a Mahatman. Bali had untold wealth and salvation as his rewards, which only the greatest bhaktas achieve. The water that washes your feet is the Ganga, and she purifies the three worlds. The Lord Siva finds her sacred enough to bear upon his blessed head, and Sagara's wild sons were saved when her water fell upon their ashes.

O Lord, salutations to you! Master of worlds, whose grace inundates those that sing your praises! I bow to you, O mighty Jewel of the Yadava clan! O most Holy One, I salute you! Narayana, I lay my head at your feet! I beg you, visit my humble home, Krishna.' Akrura was quite beside himself.

Krishna said gently, 'My brother and I will come to your home after we kill Kamsa, enemy and tyrant to all the Yadu clans. We will be delighted to come, and to please you and all our friends.'

Akrura was disappointed, even a little sad, but he rode alone into Mathura. He went to the king's palace, and informed Kamsa that his mission had been accomplished – Rama, Krishna and the gopas had come to Mathura. When he had done this, the Yadava nobleman went back to his house.

The next morning, with Rama beside him, and the gopas following them, Krishna set foot into Mathura, to roam the city and take in its sights. Towering ramparts surrounded Mathura and deep, uncrossable moats protected these.

Krishna and his party entered along a bridge across the moats, and through massive gates that seemed to be made of solid crystal and fitted with shutters of gold. Above the gates were ornamental archways, finely carved and painted.

Within the city of marvels, they saw immense granaries made of shining brass and copper. Many of these stood in sprawling parklands. Wide crossroads the brothers saw, with great mansions, each one a palace set in acres of green, wooded pleasure gardens. They saw splendid rest houses for travellers, capacious assembly halls for the people and the nobles of Mathura, and guild halls for tradesmen and artisans, who came here from distant lands.

There were other edifices, too, some made of polished wood, with huge balconies. Without exception, these were lavishly worked with golden panels, and encrusted with precious jewels of every kind – the cat's eye or vaidurya, diamonds, sapphires, corals from far seas, emeralds and pearls. Though a profusion of riches was on display, there was deep elegance and mastery in the craftsmanship of these homes and sabhas. The warbling of many birds filled the air, as did the tuneless cries of brilliant peacocks that perched in the trees and upon the windowsills of the homes and the other buildings.

The arterial highways of Mathura were magnificent: all of them swept and freshly watered. All the streets, with their bustling centres for shopping, all the courtyards of the houses and mansions, liberally strewn with every sort of flower in season and new green shoots, with puffed rice grains and unbroken grains as well.

The gateposts to the homes were adorned with plantain trees with their bunches of fruit, with areca palms and their nuts. Ceremonial water jars, full of sacred water, their mouths covered and sprinkled with the mixture of curd and sandalwood powder, rows of butter lamps, strings of jasmine, tender foliage stuck in pitchers, festive silk scarves, bright flags and buntings – all these were everywhere.

Rajan, when the sons of Vasudeva entered Mathura with their gopa elders and companions, the women of the city, agog to see their faces, came swarming onto their terraces and balconies. In their excitement, some wore their clothes back to front, while others did the same with their ornaments. One woman wore just a single bracelet out of a pair for each arm; another put on just one earring; another one anklet, while some had darkened just one eye with kajal.

There were those that were eating or even bathing, and these ran out, food in their hands and mouths, or with just a wet bathing cloth wrapped in haste around themselves. Some, who had oiled themselves before bathing, came out as they were, skins glistening, lissom bodies covered with the flimsiest cloths. Those that were asleep jumped out of their bed, and rushed out, dishevelled, to catch a glimpse of the brothers who were saviours.

Mothers who were suckling their babies rudely took their breasts from their infants, set them down, some wailing, and flew out onto terrace and balcony, for they would not miss this sight of sights.

They saw him, dark and lotus-eyed, his gait as of an elephant in musth, and without exception, when his roving glance alighted briefly on those women, when his dazzling smile pierced their eyes, they lost their hearts to him, who is the eternal love of the Devi Sri.

Valorous Kshatriya, these women had already heard about his awesome and mystical deeds, and their minds were long ago bewitched by what they had heard. Now they saw him before their eyes, and he entranced them further by his looks and his smile. They embraced his blessed form, hungrily, lasciviously, lovingly, allowing him to storm their hearts through the portals that were their eyes, while their hair stood on end in uncanny rapture, and they felt this moment was everything their lives were about, this moment of bliss and communion.

Tears streamed down their faces, shining, blooming in joy, and the women of Mathura flung storms of flowers down on Krishna and Balarama, welcoming them into the city, into their very souls.

As they sauntered along the high roads of the city of the Yadavas, delighted brahmanas accosted them, and in some transport, offered them purnakumbha – the ritual reception that is made with water-pots. They offered them curd, flowers, rice grains, sandalwood paste, and many other auspicious gifts.

The people of Mathura, most of all its women, whispered among themselves, 'Ah, what great tapasya the gopikas of Vrindavana must have performed! For these two lived among them every day for so many years – these brothers, the very sight of whom is a feast to our every sense and faculty. For we have never and shall never see anyone or anything to equal them!'

As they went along, suddenly Krishna accosted a passing dhobi, a washerman. Said the Lord, 'Friend, give us some of those fine clothes you carry. I say to you that we certainly deserve to wear such clothes, and if you give them to us great fortune will befall you.'

Krishna asked this in the humblest tone, smilingly. But the washerman was the king's dhobi, and arrogant of that. He replied rudely, 'Fools! Do knaves that wander upon hills and in jungles ever wear such clothes? Have you even seen such clothes before? These are the king's garments and you dare ask me for them.

Idiots, let the king's soldiers not hear you, or they will clap you in irons, strip you naked, give you the thrashing you deserve, and even kill you for your temerity. Begone, louts, get away from me!'

He angered Krishna, who plucked the man's head from his neck with his fingers. The washerman fell, spouting blood from his naked throat. His servants, who were carrying the fine clothes, dropped them, and fled in every direction. Calmly, Krishna picked up the clothes. Balarama and he took the garments that caught their fancy, and they gave the rest to their gopa friends. What remained they discarded on the road.

Then a friendly weaver saw them, and was filled with joy. He quickly made rich and colourful jackets for the brothers to wear over the other clothes. Splendidly attired and adorned, Rama and Krishna shone forth like two young elephants, one white and the other blue, caparisoned for a festival.

Krishna was pleased with the weaver, and blessed him to attain Sarupya-mukti – that he would have Vishnu's very form when he left the world, and eternal peace. During the rest of his mortal life, the weaver enjoyed great wealth, strength, fortune, wisdom and exceptional genius at his craft.

Wandering through Mathura, Krishna and Balarama arrived at the house of Sudama, the garland-maker. Sudama saw them, and jumping up from where he sat, prostrated before them. He made the brothers sit on the finest chairs he owned, while he washed their feet. He gave them and all the gopas fine garlands, soft and scented unguents for their skin, betel leaves to chew, and other gifts of worship.

Sudama said, 'Lord, now every purpose of our being born human is fulfilled, that you have visited our home! Why, all my clan, my bloodline, has found grace, and the Manes, the Gods and the Sages will bless us.

You are the first cause of the universe. The two of you are amsas of that First God, and you have come to save the world, and lighten its burden of evil. You are He that contains all creation within yourself. You are the precious friend to whom all beings are finally the same, even if your bhaktas are dearest to you.

I am your slave, only tell me what I can do for you. For I know that I shall find no higher blessing on any world than being able to serve you, to obey your command, whatever it be.'

Sudama gave Krishna and his companions garlands he had made with the rarest blooms of the season, the choicest flowers. Rama, Krishna and the other gopas draped the bright garlands around themselves, while Sudama prostrated at the feet of the divine brothers.

Krishna said, 'Ask for whatever you want, and I will give to you; ask me for anything at all.'

Sudama replied, 'Lords, bless me with unflinching bhakti for the Universal Soul, with special friendship toward all the Lord's devotees, and with compassion for every living creature.'

Balarama and Krishna granted Sudama, the garland-maker, all those, and they blessed him with burgeoning prosperity, extraordinary strength of mind and body, fame, handsomeness, and longevity."

BEFORE THE WRESTLING

SRI SUKA SAID, "AFTER LEAVING SUDAMA'S HOUSE, KRISHNA, RAMA AND their friends strolled down Mathura's thronging highway, while the people gazed upon them, dazzled, and could not tear their eyes away. They went a short way before Krishna saw a young woman, carrying some jars full of sandalwood paste, and other exotic anointments. Her face was exceptionally beautiful, but she was a hunchback.

Krishna walked up to her and, smiling, said, 'Pretty one, to whom are you taking the sandal paste, and the other rubs? Won't you give us some, my lovely, and I swear to you some powerful fortune will come your way before you know it!'

She looked at him, could not look away and, eyes shining, said, 'Stranger, I am Trivakra, the masseuse. King Kamsa is my client, for he is very partial to my pastes and oils. But you both are so handsome that I will surely give you some of everything that I have!'

Ah, she stared at them and could not get enough of their entrancing appearance, the indescribable sweetness of them – their smiles, their speech, the eyes – and she gave them generous quantities of the fragrant stuff she carried. Why, Trivakra lovingly anointed the brothers' arms and chests with her finest sandalwood paste. It was a different hue from both their skins, and they glowed with it, and for pleasure!

A fair crowd had gathered around the unusual scene of Trivakra and the two splendid gopa youths. Krishna had not accosted her unintentionally;

he wanted the people of Mathura to know how he could bless those he chose. He was pleased with Trivakra's affectionate attentions. Suddenly, he stepped on her feet with his own, and took her face between his thumb and two fingers. In a flash, with a sudden clicking, Krishna pulled Trivakra's bent body straight as an arrow! The three bends, which had disfigured that young woman, vanished, and a radiant, stunning beauty stood before the Avatara at the heart of the astounded crowd. Ah, she was shapely: luscious curves rounded her at hip and breast, while her waist was slender as a lotus stem.

Indeed, the touch of Krishna transformed Trivakra bodily and in spirit, too. Every noble womanly quality blossomed in her in a miraculous moment. Overcome with gratitude, drawing him toward her by an end of his upper garment, smiling with the unearthly desire she felt for him, she said, 'Bull among men, O my hero, come to my house with me. I cannot go home without you. You have stirred my heart and my body, I beg you come and slake my thirst.'

At this open solicitation, in the presence of Rama and the others, Krishna glanced around at the faces of his gopa companions, and laughed gaily. He cried, 'Woman with the beautiful brows, gracious one, let me finish what I came to accomplish in Mathura, and then I shall surely come to your house where men find solace for their every pang. Truly, you are the only sanctuary of the tired wayfarer, and who will deny that you deserve to be enjoyed!'

Sweetly he spoke to her, pressing her hand, promising to visit her, then wandered off with Balarama and his friends into the district of commerce in the great city. Walking the streets of the vaisya traders, Krishna and Rama received countless gifts – betel-leaves, strings of fine pearls and other precious jewels, delicate attars and other perfumes. The guilds of merchants received the Amsavataras of Vishnu with unfailing joy and worship.

As for the women, the merchants' wives, they looked at Krishna and Balarama, glowing in the falling dusk, and found themselves swept by a wave of love, of sheer lust. They stood gazing, some with their hair loose, others with their clothes slipping from lush bodies, yet others with ornaments coming undone. Without exception, those women stood rooted, like all the other women before them that had seen the divine brothers – yes, like figures in a painting.

Krishna now asked for directions to the yagnashala, the sacrificial hall, where the great bow of Siva stood and was worshipped with offerings. Walking into that lofty-ceilinged chamber, they saw the bow, glittering with unworldly precious stones, and as tall and wonderful as Indra's dhanusha – the rainbow.

Powerful guards stood watch over the mighty weapon. Krishna approached the bow, and these soldiers barred his way. Thrusting them aside, he picked up that tremendous ayudha in his left hand, and strung it in a flash. As the crowd that had followed him there watched, astounded, the Blue God drew the bowstring back past his ear and snapped Siva's bow in two as easily as an elephant in rut would snap a sugarcane stalk.

A thunderclap of sound rent the air, the sky, and the four quarters. In his palace, Kamsa heard that sound and he trembled. Their weapons raised, the guardsmen in the hall rushed at Krishna, roaring, 'Seize him! Bind him! Kill him!'

Quick as thinking, Balarama and Krishna seized up the broken halves of Siva's bow and battered those soldiers to death, blood spraying everywhere, the men's screams filling the air. Kamsa sent a fresh complement of soldiers, and the brothers made short work of these too.

Calmly, as if nothing of much import had happened, they came out of the ruined hall and roamed the streets of Mathura again, admiring the sights of the marvellous and affluent city. The people, who had seen what the brothers did, their strength and speed, their fearlessness, and of course their extraordinary beauty, now said among themselves that surely these two were Gods come down to the Earth.

They walked those streets and high roads for a while, and then the sun set. Krishna, Balarama and the other gopa youths returned to the parkland outside the city gates, where Nanda waited, and the gopa elders with their carts and bullocks.

When Krishna left Vrindavana, the gopikas had said that soon the fine city women of Mathura would enjoy his transcendent beauty, seeing which Sri Lakshmi abandoned the other Devas and chose Vishnu to be her only lord and sanctuary. The cowherd women had not been wrong.

Now the brothers and their friends washed their feet, and ate the night meal of payasa, rice cooked in milk. The people of Mathura whom they had befriended warned them about Kamsa's murderous plans for the next day. Yet Rama and Krishna slept soundly and unconcerned beneath the stars.

Meanwhile, in his dark palace, Kamsa heard how effortlessly Krishna broke Siva's bow, and how Rama and he killed the king's powerful guardsmen. He heard the crack of the mighty bow being riven, and the tyrant hardly slept at all that night. Awake, and even in his dreams, when he dozed fitfully, he saw evil omens that were like death's messengers.

He could feel his head clearly upon his neck, but when he looked at his reflection in the mirror, it was headless. He saw two of the moon, the planets and stars, and the lamps that burned in his royal chamber. He looked down at his own shadow and recoiled from it, for he saw it was full of strange holes.

When he shut his ears with his palms, he could not hear his own breath, or the prana humming in his body. He saw the trees out in the night as if they were made of gold; they were yellow and shone weirdly. When he walked out into the yard, he saw that his feet left no marks in the soft earth.

These were some evil omens he saw, while he has awake. When he lay in his bed and dozed, nightmares stalked his sleep. He felt himself being embraced by goblins and the spirits of the dead. He saw himself riding a donkey, and swallowing poison. Then he found himself wandering blindly through a wasteland – he was stark naked, his body gleaming with oil, and he wore a garland of red hibiscus flowers.

Kamsa would wake with a start, and not sleep again for terror of the dreams. But being awake was hardly any relief, for the fear of death held him in its cold clasp.

Rajan, finally the night ended and the sun rose from the depths of the ocean. Kamsa emerged from his royal apartment and gave orders for the wrestling to begin. A hundred servants swept the stadium and its central arena. They decked the spectators' galleries with festive wreaths, banners and buntings. Trumpets blew and the drummers beat up a storm to announce the tournament.

Led by the upper castes, the brahmanas and the kshatriyas, people of every station, from every walk of life, thronged into the stadium. They sat in different sections, according to their status. Naturally, visiting kings and queens had their separate enclosures.

Then, his heart quailing within him, but putting on a brave face, Kamsa strode in and sat in his grand throne, set apart. The trumpets blared again, and slapping their arms as they do, the wrestlers trooped into the arena below. Haughtily they walked in, and circled the arena, led by their gurus, and wearing fine ornaments on their huge muscled bodies, slick with oil. Last of all came the greatest wrestlers, the champions Chanura, Mushtika, Kuta, Salaka and Tosala – their blood coursing to the warlike rhythms of the drums, and the exultant notes of the trumpets and conch-shells.

Nanda entered, with his gopas. He came to Kamsa and formally presented the gifts he had brought from Gokula. Then the gypsy cowherds, and Krishna's young friends among the adults, took their places in an enclosure set apart for them."

KUVALAYAPIDA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "LISTEN, RAJAN. THAT MORNING, WHEN BALARAMA and Krishna finished their ablutions, they heard about the wrestlers in the arena, and set out calmly for Kamsa's palace. They arrived at the lofty gates to the stadium and saw the mighty tusker Kuvalayapida.

Already rut-maddened, his mahout prodded the elephant with his goad to charge Krishna. Krishna girded his loincloth; he tied his curly black locks in a scarf. Then he spoke to the mahout in voice like thunder.

'Give way, O keeper of elephants! Let us pass, or you and your beast shall find the Lord Yama's realm.'

Stung by Krishna's tone and these words, the mahout prodded his mastodon sharply, making Kuvalayapida rush at the Blue God, like an emissary of death, who is the spirit of time. In that charge, in a wink, the elephant seized Krishna in its trunk, but quick as light, the Lord slipped out of its grasp, struck the animal a reverberant blow on its forehead, and darted between its legs.

Kuvalayapida could not see Krishna anymore and tossed his head this way and that in rage. Then the pachyderm smelt the Avatara's sweet scent, and snaking its trunk down, caught Krishna again. The Blue One wriggled out of that clasp once more, and now ran behind the elephant. Grasping its tail, he dragged it back twenty-five paces, trumpeting and squealing in pain and fury – rather as Garuda seizes a snake in his talons and drags it along the ground.

Kuvalayapida flung himself to the left and then to the right, to try to catch Krishna in his trunk; each time, Krishna pulled the elephant's tail in the opposite direction. Round and round they whirled, like a boy playing with a young calf. Suddenly, Krishna released the beast's tail, dashed round to face the tusker and, leaping high into the air, gave him a stunning blow on his temple.

Then he ran back a few paces, with Kuvalayapida in maddened, screaming pursuit. Krishna eluded him easily, and struck him again deftly, thunderously on his head. A few such feints and blows, and the great grey creature sank to its knees. It rose again almost immediately, while Krishna pretended to be exhausted, and lay upon the ground.

The elephant thought its battle won, and charged Krishna, who was up and away in a flash, so the great ivory tusks gored deep into the hard earth, sending a shock of agony through the immense body. Kuvalayapida was blind with rage, and his mahout prodded him savagely with his goad to urge him on.

The beast rushed wildly at the quicksilver Krishna. He, who was none other than Vishnu, stood his ground coolly, seized the elephant's trunk, and in a wink twisted him to the ground. Quick as seeing, he planted an inexorable foot on Kuvalayapida's body, with such divine strength that the creature lay motionless. As if this was child's play, and so indeed it was for him, Krishna pulled out the tusks of the elephant, and with a few brutal strokes killed both Kuvalayapida and his keeper.

Terrible and utterly beautiful Krishna looked. The bloody tusks rested across his shoulders, his face like a dark lotus filmed in beads of sweat, and his body and clothes spotted with blood and ichor from the beast and its mahout. One tusk he let fall, and still carrying the other, Krishna strolled into the wrestling arena, with Balarama beside him and surrounded by some of his gopa companions.

He was, as Sages have said – a thunderbolt to the wrestlers that must face him, a saviour to the common people, an incarnate Kama to women, a kinsman to the gopas, a bane to tyrants across the Earth, a child to his parents, a Yama to Kamsa, just another youth to the ignorant, the Supreme Truth to Yogis, and their Ishtadevata to the Yadavas.

He was all these, embodying the nine rasas, as he walked haughtily into the stadium and the wrestling arena with his brother. Kamsa knew Kuvalayapida was dead; he saw that Rama and Krishna were invincible, and his spirit trembled. The brothers, with their broad chests and muscled arms, wearing fine clothes, ornaments, and wildflower garlands, sauntered in like two famous actors, and the crowd gazed upon their splendour, and gazed on.

The people, come from city and country, packed tightly into the galleries, quivered in excitement when they saw the two young lions. Suddenly, their faces and their eyes lit up, and they drank the magic sight greedily, and enthralled, drank on, never blinking, helpless.

It seemed they drank the brothers down into their souls with their eyes, laved them with their tongues, smelled them with their noses, and embraced them with their arms. They began to murmur among themselves, in soft delirium, about whatever they had heard about the brothers. Some of them, of course, had actually witnessed some of Krishna and Rama's extraordinary deeds.

They began to speak about how handsome the two were, how awesomely brave and strong, yet how gentle and sweet, and how masterful at everything they did.

The people said, 'Truly, they are amsas of the Lord Mahavishnu, born into the house of Vasudeva.'

'Yes, Krishna is Vasudeva's son, and he was given to Nanda Gopa when he was just a mite. He grew in the wilderness in Vrindavana, hidden from Kamsa, hidden from the world.'

'How many Asuras he killed in the wilds – Putana, Trinavarta, Shankachuda, Kesin, Dhenuka, Agha, and others too, all horrible and strong.'

'He brought the arjuna trees crashing down when he could barely walk!'

'He saved the gopas and their herd from the forest fire.'

'He humbled Kaliya and sent him slithering back to the sea like a worm.'

'Why, he quelled the pride of Indra himself, holding up Mount Govardhana in one hand, shielding Gokula from the Deva king's thunder, lightning and sheet rain.'

'Every day, the gopis would see his face and all their sorrows would melt from their hearts, and joy course through them to look at Krishna smile.'

'He is always smiling, and the great Rishis say that when he comes to save and protect the Yadavas, our people shall find prominence, wealth, fame and power, such as we have never yet known.'

'And look at his elder brother, as beautiful as Krishna, as fair as Krishna is dark. Rama of the lotus eyes slew the demons Pralamba, Vatsaka, Baka, and many others.'

Thus the people spoke. Suddenly, the trumpets and horns blared forth to announce the commencement of the wrestling. The champion Chanura swaggered upto Rama and Krishna, and, his tone full of silken deceit, said in the gentlest manner, 'Krishna, Rama, your fame as young heroes and great wrestlers has spread across the earth! Our king heard of your prowess. He wanted to see you wrestle, and summoned you here to Mathura.'

Krishna and Rama gazed calmly back at the massive wrestler, who felt a strange disturbance. Chanura continued, now soft menace in his voice, 'Subjects that please their king in thought, word and deed, prosper, my young friends. Those that do not, find unpleasant consequences.

We all know that, while taking their herd out to pasture, the gopas wrestle among themselves for sport. We know they are keen wrestlers. So let us wrestle now, you and us, and please the king. For then all beings shall be pleased with us, since the king embodies all beings in himself.'

Krishna listened in silence to Chanura, until the man had finished. Krishna was pleased that Chanura invited him to wrestle; that was what he had come for, and more. Now, to suit the occasion, he said, 'We are gypsy foresters, and we are indeed subjects of the king of the Bhojas. We will always do what pleases our sovereign, and think of it as being a blessing to us.

Yet, we are mere boys, and we can only wrestle against other youths of our age and strength, and never seriously but playfully. The wrestling here should be between equals, otherwise sin will fall upon even those that watch.'

But Chanura said, 'Neither you nor your brother, whose strength is a legend, can be called mere boys. We saw how effortlessly you killed Kuvalayapida, who was as strong as a thousand ordinary elephants. We have no doubt that you can wrestle with the best of our wrestlers, and no sin whatever shall result from it.

So Krishna, scion of the Yadavas, you wrestle now against me, and let your brother match his strength against Mushtika."

THE DEATH OF KAMSA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "BALARAMA AND KRISHNA NODDED TO ACCEPT the wrestlers' challenge. Slowly, the brothers walked toward Chanura and Mushtika. They circled briefly, the comparatively slight gopa youths and the huge, hirsute wrestlers of Mathura. Darting forward the wrestlers seized the boys, locking heavy arms and legs against slender ones, pushing and pulling, bending this way and that, vying for the edge that would bring victory.

As they wrestled, they struck Rama and Krishna with clenched fists, powerful forearms, butted rocklike heads against tender heads, and smashed brawny chests against lithe ones. They tripped the youths to the ground, in whirling manoeuvres, holding the adversary by the waist and expertly flinging a leg across the other's legs. They then leapt with all their vast weight upon the supine opponent, taking the breath out of him.

Otherwise, Chanura or Mushtika would heft Rama or Krishna bodily, and dash his antagonist down onto the ground. Mainly, Kamsa's wrestlers seemed to have the day against the seemingly weaker youngsters.

Rajan, the women in the crowd, enchanted as they were by the youths, said in dismay, 'Such injustice! How do the king and his kshatriyas tolerate this flagrantly unequal contest?'

'How can mere boys, still like tender saplings, wrestle with these mountainous men, these trained athletes, whose bodies are hard like diamonds?'

'This is a violation of all dharma, and one should not stay here to watch this brutality. For the law is clear that one must not remain in a place where dharma is being breached.'

Another group of spectators said, 'No wise man will be part of just any assembly or crowd, indiscriminately. For great evil can come of it.'

'True. Regardless of whether you acquiesce in the crime or not, your very presence gives you a sure share in the sin being committed.'

'Ah, look at Krishna's sweet face – like a lotus with dewdrops on it.'

'The beads of sweat on his face sparkle like jewels as he circles the vile Chanura.'

'Look at Rama! Look at his brow knit in anger, and his wrathful smile and his eyes red with his mood, as he circles Mushtika.'

'Ah, blessed is the land of Vraja, and most sacred. For he that even Parameshwara worships lived there in a human shape, decked with gorgeous vanamalas. He ranged those hills and forest, tending the herd with his brother and playing divine music on his flute!'

'Surely, the gopikas of Vrindavana must have done awesome tapasya, for they drank their fill of this ineffable form every day with the cups of their eyes. They did this even as they went about their daily chores. They sang songs of him, while milking their cows, pounding corn, churning curd for butter, smearing cowdung on the ground, sweeping their homes, or rocking their babies to sleep. Their voices choked at the nearness of Krishna, or at the very thought of him.'

'Truly, truly, his is the form that contains the essence of all beauty, of every grace, majesty and glory. In him alone dwells all that is perfect – unequalled, incomparable, and immortal.'

'Untold punya they must have that they ran out into the street to hear his flute, when he took the cows out to pasture in the morning, and when he returned at dusk. All those years they saw his radiant face, full of grace and mercy, his smile that fills the heart so it will almost burst with joy. No other women are remotely as fortunate as those gopis.'

As the women, and the others, spoke thus among themselves, the Lord Hari, master of yoga, decided to finish his opponent. Meanwhile, Vasudeva and Devaki also heard the women's anxious talk, and felt pangs of fear and remorse – they should have begged Akrura not to bring Rama and Krishna to die in Mathura. Of course, they did not know the unworldly strength of the brothers, except from what they had heard.

Krishna and Chanura fought by the formal laws prescribed for bouts of wrestling, as did Balarama and Mushtika. After the initial advantage Krishna had allowed Kamsa's wrestler, he began to strike him back with bunched fists. These blows were deceptively lazy to look at, but they struck like thunderbolts. Quickly, Chanura felt as if every bone in his body was broken, while Krishna was proof against everything with which the gigantic wrestler hit him. Chanura felt exhausted; he knew that if he did not kill Krishna quickly, he himself would die.

With the speed of a hawk, he struck Krishna simultaneously with both fists, like thunder and lightning, across the Avatara's blue chest. These blows would have shattered any other adversary, for Chanura put every ounce of his strength into them. Krishna did not budge an inch; the terrific blows did not even rock him back. He received them, smiling, as an elephant might a blow with a garland.

Now, quicker than light, Krishna seized Chanura's hand and whirled him round with a God's strength, until the immense wrestler was a blur. The crowd held its breath. Krishna stopped, and dashed the unconscious Chanura on the ground. Chanura's turban flew from his broken neck, all the fine garlands and ornaments scattered, as of those of an effigy pulled down. Chanura was dead.

Mushtika died before Chanura did. He, too, had aimed a few mighty blows at Balarama. Then Rama struck him back, nonchalantly, with his open palm. Mushtika trembled, vomited blood, and fell like some tree that the wind blows over by its roots. He never stirred again.

Another giant wrestler, Kuta, rushed at Balarama. Rama received the charge with a lefthanded blow. Kuta dropped as if struck by lightning, his head hanging loose, half severed from the neck.

Sala and Tosala ran roaring at Krishna, who leapt into the air and kicked Sala's head clean off his throat, in a scarlet burst, and then, growling, tore Tosala in two up from the fork of his legs. Every other wrestler fled the arena, whichever way they could.

Krishna and Rama now clambered up the tiers of the spectators' galleries, and pulled their gopa friends down into the wrestling arena, to share in their triumph. Horns blew, and conches, drums sounded, and anklets jangling, the cowherd youths danced their celebration round and round the white arena.

The crowd rose, clapped its hands, keeping time, and sang aloud, to celebrate with Rama and Krishna. Pious brahmanas sang out their blessings, and everyone, men, women and children, was ecstatic at the outcome of the wrestling.

Kamsa was not pleased. When his main wrestlers lay dead, their blood leaking onto the pale sand of the arena, when the others had fled, and the people of Mathura exulted, the king roared above every other noise.

Kamsa screamed, 'Throw the vile gopa boys out! Seize all the property and wealth of Nanda and his wretched cowherds. Bind Nanda in fetters, he will pay for this. Kill the deceitful Vasudeva and kill my father Ugrasena, who have joined hands with my enemies. Kill them now; spill their blood here! Kill them all...'

He never finished. Making himself light as the air, Krishna sprang up in one leap onto the highest dais where his uncle Kamsa sat in his grand throne. Seeing death fly toward him, Kamsa jumped up and drew his sword. He clutched his shining shield, as well.

Using occult powers that he had inherited from his Gandharva father, Kamsa flew this way and that through the air, holding up his shield and brandishing his sword. Like a bird, he flitted here and there, but like an eagle Krishna seized him as Garuda does a serpent.

The great crown of the Bhojas slipped from Kamsa's head, and in a wink, Krishna had him by the tuft on his head. By the tuft, he flung him down into the arena far below, and from that great height, leapt down after him. Krishna, support of the worlds, the one perfectly free spirit in the universe, landed squarely on the demon king, killing him instantaneously.

Roaring, his eyes crimson, Krishna dragged Kamsa's body round and round the arena, as a lion does the carcass of an elephant he has killed. In wild and primitive ceremony, Krishna raged, howled, he sang, danced and raged.

The crowd fell silent in horror. Shrieks, screams, shouts and moans broke from the frightened, shocked people of Mathura. Kamsa had lived in fear of Vishnu all his life, always imagining the terrible Blue God coming for him, with his chakra whirling in his hand. Whether he ate, drank, spoke, walked, slept, or merely breathed, Kamsa lived in fear of the moment when the Lord would actually come to kill him. For this absorption, now his soul emerged from his body, a pulsating light purified of every darkness and sin, and melted into Krishna. Kamsa found salvation, when Krishna killed him; he found union with God, which condition the greatest men hardly attain.

Now Kamsa's eight younger brothers, led by Kanka and Nyagrodha, surged at Krishna to avenge their dead brother and king. Quick as thinking, Balarama, with one of the dead Kuvalayapida's tusks in his hand, appeared between Krishna and the savage eight. In a few crimson moments, he beat them to death, armed and powerful though they were. He killed them, as a great lion will some jackals.

Kettledrums beat festive rhythms in the sky. In joy, Brahma and the other Devas poured down a cascade of heaven's blooms on Krishna. They sang his praises, and Apsaras danced on air.

But now the wives of the dead men, their friends and relatives, came streaming down into the arena. The women beat their breasts, tore their hair, fell across their husbands' corpses, and tears streaming down their faces, set up a heartbreaking lament.

'Oh my lord, my love! We are destroyed – your home, your wife, your children.' All of them wailed like this.

Kamsa's queens cried, 'Lord, now you are dead Mathura is widowed just as we are. Our city has lost its master and its lustre. Never again shall we see her glory or her streets ring with celebrations and festivities. This is the end.'

'Great husband, alas, you were cruel and brutal to the innocent, which is why you lie there now, life fled from you. Ah, retribution comes for sure to those that persecute the good.'

Another woman, a flood of truth sweeping through her broken heart, moaned, 'Oh, this Krishna is the Lord of all. He is the font and the dissolution of every living being, just as he is their nourisher. How can anyone that spurns him ever hope to find happiness?'

Krishna came among those women, consoling them with soft, kind words, his gentle and sacred touch. He gave orders for the dead to be cremated with every proper ritual and with honour.

At last, Balarama and Krishna came to Devaki and Vasudeva, and had their fetters and chains removed. The youths knelt before them, and laid their heads at their feet. Having seen what the boys had done, Vasudeva and Devaki knew who they were – incarnations of the Final Truth, the Brahman. They felt too awestruck and nervous to embrace Rama and Krishna.

AFTER KAMSA'S DEATH

SRI SUKA SAID, "KRISHNA SAW HOW HIS NATURAL PARENTS DID NOT embrace him as any father and mother might their son, and he knew they had found enlightenment – they knew who he truly was. Yet, he wished it to be otherwise for a time, and he used his mayashakti to achieve his purpose. He drew the veil of ignorance across their hearts again.

Once more, with Balarama beside him, he approached Vasudeva and Devaki. The brothers prostrated at their feet, and cried 'Mother!' and 'Father!' as any sons would, to please their parents after not seeing them for so long.

Krishna cried, 'Poor father, how much anxiety you have borne on our account all these years. Yet, no joy of parenthood ever rewarded you, none of the delight that every father knows as he watches his sons as babies, children, and youths.

We were unfortunate, too, that we never saw you at all during those irretrievable parts of our lives. We never experienced the joy of a father's caress. No man can ever repay his parents for the love he receives from them during those tender years – not in a hundred lives. No man can repay the debt of life he owes them, of his conception and his birth, of their loving nurture when he is a child, of his mind and his body. All of these form the foundation of his every later achievement – of all his dharma, artha, kama, and finally moksha, too.

Having received life and nurture from his parents, if a son fails to support them and their every need when they are old, Yamadutas shall make him eat his own flesh in hell. Why, the man who does not look after his parents, his faithful wife, his young children, his Guru, any holy man dependent on him – such a man is a corpse, though he might breathe and appear to be alive.

All these years, you both have lived as Kamsa's prisoners, in constant dread of him, and these years of our lives have been spent in vain, that we could not come to help you, to set you free.

Oh my mother and father, I beg you, forgive Rama and me for not coming to Mathura before, when you most needed us, for not coming to rescue you from evil Kamsa.'

Suddenly, Devaki and Vasudeva's mood of hesitation and awe changed. When they heard these words and this tone from Hari, soul of the universe, who had taken a human form, they were charmed, beguiled, and their hearts melted. Tears welling in their eyes, they took Rama and Krishna onto their laps, and fondled and kissed them.

So overwhelmed were Devaki and Vasudeva that they held their boys fervently, blissfully, sobbing in ecstasy, but they could speak no word. Thus, by his omnipotent maya, Krishna bound his parents with unseen cords of filial love, and now they looked upon him as just their son, and no more as an Avatara of God.

Soon, when Devaki would release him from her embrace, Krishna proclaimed his grandfather Ugrasena king of the Yadavas. He said to the old one, 'Great king, command us, and all your subjects that dwell in the land of the Surasenas! Because of Yayati's curse of old, no Yadava may sit upon a throne. Yet, as long as I serve you, my lord, even the Devas shall bow their heads at your feet and offer you worship. What then of other humans?'

When Krishna liberated the city of Mathura, all the Yadus, Vrishnis, Andhakas, Madhuas, Dasaarhas, Kukuras, and every other good man and woman returned to the city from which they had fled to distant parts for terror of Kamsa, who had tyrannised them. Krishna welcomed all these back to the city of their fathers.

He gave them back their homes, and new homes to those that had lost theirs. He gave them abundant wealth out of the dead Kamsa's overflowing coffers – their wealth, which that satanic king had taken as he pleased. Balarama and Krishna now protected Mathura, and the exiles that returned, as well as all the other people of that city, lived in newfound peace, and harmony. The bonds of darkness in which Kamsa had bound it broken, the ancient city, home of the noble Yadavas, seemed to bloom in a fresh spring of the spirit.

Daily, the people saw the radiant, always smiling, joyful, beautiful and merciful face of Krishna, and peace and bliss welled in their hearts, healing them of the wounds, of body and soul, that Kamsa had inflicted upon them. The Yadavas drank the amrita of his divine face, and bent old men grew straight and careworn years seemed to fall away from them. Fresh new strength and vitality surged through them again, at just the sight of him.

Rajan, a few days went by, then with Balarama at his side, Devaki's son Krishna called Nanda, and, hugging the cowherd in love, spoke to the gopa chieftain gently. Tears in his fathomless black eyes, Krishna said, 'Father, with untold love you raised us, and everyone knows that a child is more precious to a parent than his or her body.

The real mother and father are not merely those that give birth, but those who adopt, nurture, and raise – most of all, a child that its natural parents are forced to abandon from some dreadful compulsion of fate. That is what Yasodha and you have done for me.'

Krishna, lord of all things, stifled a sob. He embraced Nanda again. 'Oh my father! You must go back to Vraja, while I must remain here for a while, for there is much that I have to do in Mathura for these new friends and kinsmen. Tell Mother Yasodha that no sooner have I finished than I will fly home to see her, and everyone else in Gokula. For I will be as sad to be away from them, as they will be at not seeing me.'

Vasudeva gave bounteous gifts to Nanda and the other gopas – household wares, gold, ornaments, fine clothes, and many priceless things besides – to acknowledge a debt to his old friend that he could never repay. Nanda thanked him gravely. Then, without a word, with deep dignity and untellable love, he embraced his foster-sons, Rama and Krishna, whom he had raised. Turning away to hide the tears that sprang in his eyes, he set out on the long journey home to Vraja, with the other cowherds, old and young, all plunged in sorrow."

Sri Suka paused, before he continued, "Rajan, now Vasudeva called his Acharya and some other prominent brahmanas of Mathura. He had them perform the upanayanam for his two sons, who were born kshatriyas, after all, though they had grown among gypsy cowherders, who do not undergo the investiture of the sacred thread because they are sudras.

Vasudeva invited all the powerful and influential brahmanas in Mathura for the ceremony. He welcomed them with honour, and gave them all the finest dakshina he could afford, for coming – gold, plump milch cows and calves, richly caparisoned, and draped with necklaces of gold and jewels.

When Rama and Krishna were born, Vasudeva had decided that one day, if his sons lived, he would perform the thread ceremony for them and donate many sacred cows to the brahmanas of the city. Then, being Kamsa's prisoner and having had to send his sons far from Mathura, the only cows Vasudeva had been able to offer the priests were in his mind. All these years later, he kept the word that he had given himself.

After tying the sacred thread round their bodies, when they became dvijas, twice-born, Garga, Kulaguru to the Yadavas, made Rama and Krishna take the profound Gayatra vrata of brahmacharya. For three days and nights, they kept a fast, and observed that sacred vow in every particular, once Garga had initiated them into the Gayatri mantra, the Mother of all mantras.

Humbly, the brothers accepted all this, and participated in the rituals as if they were ordinary kshatriya youths. They, the source of all lore, the omniscient masters of the worlds, concealed their innate spiritual knowledge, with which they were born, the divinity that was part of them.

Now, it followed that they must seek out a Guru to teach them, for they had entered varnasrama with the upanayanam, the thread ceremony. They were brahmacharins now, and they must enter gurukula, as well, and dwell in a master's house, as his sishyas. This was the traditional way.

They went to Sandipani, who hailed originally from holy Kasi, but now lived in Avanti. Formally Rama and Krishna approached him, with all reverence and humility, and asked him to take them to be his disciples. From their first moment in Sandipani's asrama, the Avataras were model sishyas, who kept every vrata, and whom every other pupil could emulate.

They served their Guru with as much bhakti as if he were God on earth. Sandipani saw how worshipful and loving they were, how pure-hearted, and that illustrious master taught them the Vedas and their Upanishads, and all the subsidiary branches of those great trees of learning and wisdom. Shiksha, which is phonetics, chandas that is prosody, vyakarana which is grammar, jyotisha, astronomy and astrology, kalpa the science of rituals, and nirukta, etymology, Sandipani taught Rama and Krishna.

He taught them military science, the art of war, especially archery that they had no knowledge of yet. He taught them the mantras for the devastras, for summoning, loosing, and withdrawing these. Dharma Shastra he taught them, the laws of Manu. He taught them Mimamsa, logic and political science, and its six branches – dealing with peace treaties, war, expeditions, encampments, subversion and sedition, and the formation and consolidation of alliances.

O protector of men, the two brothers, the princes who were the creators of all this knowledge, mastered the Guru's every subject, when they had heard it just once from his lips. In sixty-four days and nights, Rama and Krishna, their minds restrained and one-pointed, mastered as many traditional kalaas, the ancient arts and crafts.

Thus completing their education in an incredibly brief time, Rama and Krishna asked Sandipani to accept gurudakshina from them, the offering that a sishya gives his Guru when he finally leaves his gurukula.

Their Acharya had been witness to their superhuman intelligence and powers. He consulted his wife about what he should ask of them as his dakshina, and then he asked them for the return of his son, alive, the boy who had drowned in the sea at Prabhasa. The brothers, now maharathikas, climbed into their chariot and swept away like the wind to that sacred shore.

Arriving at Prabhasa, the brothers alighted from their ratha, and sat on the sands for a while, waiting. Samudra, the Sea God, heard they had come, and emerged from his deeps to pay Rama and Krishna homage. He brought them gifts from his submarine kingdom.

Krishna said, 'You took a youth from this shore, with a wave. The boy is our Guru's son, and we want him restored to his father.'

Samudra Deva replied, 'Lord I did not take the youth. In my waters, there lives an Asura called Panchajana. He has assumed the shape of a conch shell, and he swallowed your Guru's son.'

Krishna plunged into the sea, dove down a hundred fathoms, and killed the demon Panchajana. He tore open his body, but found no sign of Sandipani's son. He took the part of the dead Asura's body that had turned forever into a conch.

Rama and Krishna now rode to the God Death's favourite dwelling, the subterranean place called Samyamini. Reaching Yama's gates, Krishna raised his newly acquired conch shell, and blew a resounding blast. Yama, judge of all, came out of his city, and prostrated before Krishna, who dwells in the hearts of beings.

Death said, 'Mahavishnu! You have come in a human form, for your divine lila. Command me, what can I do for you?'

Krishna replied, 'My Guru's son is here with you, and there is no sin in this because his karma is exhausted. Yet, O sovereign of death, release him at my word.'

Yama gave up the youth to Krishna, who brought him back alive to Sandipani, and offered him to the master as gurudakshina. Clasping his son, Sandipani said, 'Divine children, how wonderfully you have paid your dakshina! The Guru of young men like you will never want for anything.

Go back to Mathura now, Kshatriyas, for your tutelage is complete. May your fame spread across the worlds, and may the Veda that you learnt from me remain fresh in your memory in this life and the next.'

With their Guru's leave, Rama and Krishna returned to Mathura, in their chariot swift as the mind, the sound of its wheels like muted thunder. The people of that city were as happy as men that recover a lost fortune."

UDDHAVA GOES TO VRAJA

SRI SUKA SAID, "UDDHAVA, AN IMPORTANT VRISHNI MINISTER IN THE court of Mathura, was Krishna's cousin, and his friend and bhakta besides. Uddhava was the Rishi Brihaspati's sishya, and was known for his exceptional intelligence.

One day, Krishna, who of course was the Lord Hari himself, destroyer of the sorrows of his bhaktas, took his great and wise devotee Uddhava's hand, and said, 'Dear Uddhava, you must go to Gokula on my behalf. I know that my mother and father, Nanda and Yasodha, grieve without me, as do the gopikas.

My friend, take them a message from me, console them – for I am like their very prana to them, and their hearts are always with me. They haven't a care or a thought, even for their bodies or lives, so absorbed are they, so obsessed with me. After all, Uddhava, I always love and especially protect those that abandon their worldly interests and cares, and their every other attachment and support, for my sake.

The gopi women think of me night and day, every moment, and they are sick with sorrow since I left them and came away to Mathura. They keep bodies and souls together with this single thought, and believing what I said to them, that I would go back soon to Vraja. Otherwise, they would die pining.

So go, my dear Uddhava, and take my message of love to Nanda, Yasodha and the gopis, and assure them again that I will visit them soon.'

Honoured by this mission, Uddhava set out for Gokula. He arrived at Vraja, even as the sun was setting, and the dust from the hooves of the herd, returning from pasture, swathed everything, and his chariot, too.

Gokula echoed with the bellowing of bulls that locked horns over the cows that were in heat. It rang with the glad cries of fat milch cows, milk-heavy udders swaying, which rushed toward their calves, having been away from them all day. Frisky calves, white as milk, gambolled around their mothers, enhancing the gentle fascination of the rustic scene.

It was the time of the second milking, too. The drone of milk spraying from a thousand teats mingled with the songs of many flutes. Everywhere Uddhava saw gopas and gopis, handsome and beautiful, brightly dressed and adorned, so many of the women still singing songs of Rama and Krishna, and their wonderful deeds. How full of yearning those songs were.

Incense burned in every home, during the third sandhya of the day. Lamps burned, too, and colourful garlands hung at every gate and door. Uddhava felt the deep sense of sanctity that enveloped Gokula, from the cowherds' worship of God, as sacred Agni, as Surya, as their guests and their herd, as Brahmanas, as the Pitrs and the Devas.

The trees of Vrindavana were all in bloom, a riot of colour. Birds thronged their branches, with a feast of many songs. Bees lent their drone to this music, swarming over the open flowers. Uddhava saw crystalline pools all around, splendid with lotuses and every manner of water bird – regal swan, brilliant ibis, teal, stork, crane, and water fowl.

Darkness fell by the time Uddhava actually entered Gokula, and this was as he wanted it, for he did not wish to draw immediate attention to himself. Nanda came out to welcome Uddhava, embracing Krishna's messenger in joy, and receiving him with every show of honour. He fed Uddhava the finest delicacies, and gave him the softest bed upon which to rest his tired limbs, while some gopis massaged his legs. Soon, tiredness left Uddhava, and now Nanda spoke to him.

'Dear Uddhava, I hope my old friend Vasudeva is enjoying his freedom, and enjoying the sons from whom he was separated for so long. Finally, nemesis caught up with Kamsa and his friends. For too long, the monster made the Yadavas suffer, persecuting them every way he could.'

Nanda paused, sighed softly, then asked, 'Does Krishna still remember us? Does he ever think of this place, Gokula, that was his domain? Does he speak of Yasodha or me, his young friends among whom he grew, our Vrindavana, and its hills and valleys? Does he miss his beloved herd?'

Tears filled the gopa chieftain's eyes. He went on, 'Will he ever come back here, Uddhava, even briefly? So we might see his radiant face and his smile again, if only for a day? Ah, I cannot tell you how often he snatched us all from death's very jaws. From the terrible fire in the forest he saved us, from the storm of Indra. He saved us from the most fearsome demons, from Vrishabhasura and the serpent Kaliya.'

Again Nanda paused, now wiping a tear that fell out of his eye. Deeper sorrow in his voice, he resumed, 'Revered Uddhava, do you know we have lost our enthusiasm for our work since Krishna left. Our very lives seem hollow without him. Everywhere we look, we see his face, hear his merry laughter. Our memories of him – the way he looked at us and spoke to us so lovingly, the marvellous things he did – are realler to us than our days and nights.

We look at every lake and pool, every hill, glade and forest, all of them adorned with the marks of his feet, and we lose ourselves in thoughts of him. I now think of what the Brahmana Garga said, that our Rama and Krishna are Avataras born to accomplish some great mission on earth for the Devas, and I believe him. We watched their incredible deeds, while they were with us, but we never thought of them as incarnations of Vishnu, but just as our Rama and Krishna, two gopa boys with some extraordinary powers.

Yet, in Mathura we saw how they killed Kamsa, who was as strong as a thousand elephants, his tusker Kuvalayapida, and his huge wrestlers – effortlessly as lions dispatch lesser beasts. Krishna snapped Siva's bow, which was as wide as three palm trees, like an elephant might snap a dry branch.

But why speak of all that, when here in Vrindavana we saw him uproot Mount Govardhana and hold it aloft for a week? It was child's play to him, just as it was for him to kill Pralamba, Dhenuka, Arishta, Trinavarta, and Baka.'

Again, Nanda paused to shake his head in wonder, and to fetch another sigh. In a moment, he began his dreamy reminiscing once more. Until the gopa was overcome by emotion, and could not speak anymore, but sobbed like a child to think of his sons who had left him and gone away to the city.

Yasodha stood listening to him, and what Nanda said filled her with such a tide of love and memories that her breasts flowed milk to think of her dark blue son, and her eyes flowed tears.

Deeply moved to see this love in Nanda and Yasodha, Uddhava said feelingly, 'O great souls blessed with such adoration for Krishna, who is Narayana, the progenitor of all beings! Surely, no one is more fortunate than you, that you love him so much.

Balarama and Krishna are the seed and the womb from which the universe is born. They are the eternal Purusha and Prakriti. They pervade every jiva, and rule them, while remaining distinct from them. The jiva that remembers these two at the time of his death consumes his store of karma, even if his mind is impure, and finds moksha – the final attainment of every jiva, illumination.

Nanda, Mahatman, you have found the highest bhakti for that Being, the Supreme Narayana, who has assumed a human form to fulfil a great mission in this world. For you there is nothing left to accomplish in life. I have come to tell you that, before long, Krishna, refuge of his bhaktas and home of all things spiritual, will return to Gokula, to make his mother and his father glad.

After he killed Kamsa, the enemy of the faithful, in the wrestling arena, he told you that he would return to Vraja soon. He will keep his word.'

Nanda and Yasodha's faces lit up to hear this. Uddhava continued, 'Noble friends, put away your sorrow, for Krishna will be by your side sooner than you think. Why, this very moment, he is nearer than you imagine, no one nearer than him. For he dwells in your hearts, in every heart, as fire does in firewood.

None is especially dear to the Lord, nor anyone his enemy. He makes no difference between the high and the low – to him, all are jivas, spirits, and all are equal. He has no father or mother, no wife or son. He has no family, and no one is a stranger to him. The truth is he was never born, and he has no body.

He has no karma, good or evil, which binds him to birth and death. He incarnates into this world out of his will, for his sport – he manifests himself as the Devas, in men, and as other creatures, too. He does this to help seekers find moksha.

He, Aja, the Un-born, is beyond the gunas of Prakriti, yet adopts these, sattva, rajas, and tamas. He does this for his lila, with perfect detachment, and creates, supports and destroys the universe.

As the giddy man feels the world is spinning round him, so, also, ahamkara persuades the jiva to believe the Atman, the soul, is the agent that experiences this world of samsara, of illusions. In fact, only the mind, and not the spirit, creates the delusion of actions, enjoyments and pain.

When the individual Atman frees itself from the bondage of karma, it realises how the Paramatman is detached from the great spinning wheel of the universe, though that universe and everything in it is founded in the Supreme Soul.

Krishna is that Paramatman, the Lord Hari, and not just your son. He is the Sun, everyone's child, everyone's father and mother. He is the soul of all beings; he is the master, the Ishwara of us all. No being, no world, nothing exists apart from Achyuta, the eternal One – none that is seen, none that is heard, nothing in the past, the present or the future, nothing that moves or is motionless, nothing great or small. Only Krishna is all things; only he is real.'

While Uddhava, Nanda and Yasodha spoke together about Krishna, the night flitted away. The gopis rose before dawn, to receive the sun with lighted lamps, and worshipped the household deities at the threshold of their dwellings. They swept and embellished their homes, and began to churn curd.

Their bangles made tinkling music, their ample breasts and hips swayed alluringly to the vigorous rhythm of the churning, as did their necklaces. Their lovely faces shone in the soft lamplight, their saffron tinted cheeks glowed with their pendulous earrings reflecting the flames. All their ornaments glittered by the light of those lamps, and by the first flush of the dawn that crept inside.

They greeted the coming dawn by singing, again songs about their precious Krishna. These songs and the whirring of their churning rods spread everywhere, rose into the heavens, and dispelled anything inauspicious, which lingered from the night, from the four quarters.

Only when the sun rose did the gopikas notice the chariot with golden inlay, which stood outside Nanda's house. They gathered round it quickly, and began to speculate whose this ratha was.

'Has Kamsa's friend Akrura, the cruel one, come again? It was he that took our lotus-eyed Krishna away to Mathura.'

'Does he want to perform his beloved master Kamsa's last rites with the flesh of our bodies?'

The women stood talking among themselves, when Uddhava emerged after his morning bath and worship."

UDDHAVA AND THE GOPIS

SRI SUKA SAID, "THE WOMEN OF VRAJA SAW UDDHAVA. THEY SAW HOW good-looking he was, his arms long and muscular, face bright as a lotus flower, his eyes long as lotus petals. He wore yellow robes, a garland of lotuses, and ear studs that sparkled with priceless gemstones.

The gopikas said, 'Who is this handsome man, dressed and adorned like Krishna? Where has he come from, and why? Is he someone's messenger?'

Attracted by the stranger, curious and smiling, they crowded around Uddhava, the great Krishna bhakta. When he told them he was Krishna's messenger, they welcomed him with more dazzling smiles, affectionate looks, and sweet words. They led him away a short distance, where they were alone with him.

They found him a comfortable seat, and when he sat, they said, 'So you are a messenger from the lord of the Yadavas. Perhaps he sent you to comfort his mother and father?'

'We feel certain there is nothing and no one else in Gokula that he might remember. Whereas the bond of love for near family is one that even the great Rishis can hardly break. But friendship with others is motivated – as that between men and women who desire each other sexually, or bees and flowers. That affection lasts only until the desire is slaked, the honey sipped.'

'A courtesan will abandon an impoverished client without a second thought. His subjects will desert a king who is too weak to feed and protect them anymore. A sishya will leave his Guru, as soon as his tutelage is complete. The priests at a sacrifice will turn their backs on the master of the yagna, as soon as they have their dakshina from him.'

'Birds abandon a tree when its fruit are exhausted. A guest leaves his host's house, when he has finished his meal. Birds and beasts flee a forest when it burns. A lover deserts his beloved, when he has finished enjoying her.'

Thus, the lovely gopikas spoke to Uddhava. They wept without restraint, spoke of their love without shame – his life among them, as a child, a boy, a magnificent youth, as their lover. Now and again, they would burst into tearful snatches of song, in praise of him, describing his incredible feats or the delight he gave them.

Uddhava saw how completely obsessed they were, in body, mind and every word they spoke. Suddenly, one gopi saw a honeybee, buzzing toward her, and mad with love and grief, began to talk to the creature as if it was Krishna's messenger.

The woman cried, 'Honey-sucker, O you friend of the disloyal, unfaithful, roguish Krishna! Don't you land upon our feet, and stain them with the saffron on your bearded feelers from Krishna's vanamala. For that saffron is from the breasts of some women in Mathura, our rivals in love.'

Another said, 'These days, your friend and master Krishna, lord of the Madhus, is renowned for making love to the highborn women of the Yadava court. That sabha surely mocks him for once having made love to us simple, rustic wenches.'

A third woman spoke, 'Once, he made us drink the amrita of his sweet lips, and immediately abandoned us, exactly as you honey-suckers do to every flower from which you drink. Ah, we wonder how Sri Devi, Goddess of fortune, still attends on him, when he is so fickle, so treacherous in love. Surely, he seduces even her mind with that honeyed tongue of his, Krishna the virtuous!'

The bee still buzzed round the women, and the first gopi said sharply to it, 'O Six-legs, why sing that primeval one's glory to us, that are homeless gypsies? We know all about him, who was once Vrajapati, lord of Vraja, and is now Yadupati, master of the Yadavas. Fly to Mathura, O honey-drinker, and sing your praises of Krishna to his new companions, the women of Mathura.

They will give you whatever you want, for he now cools the heat of their breasts and hearts with his lovemaking.'

'As for us, what does he care for us, when he can seduce any woman in Swarga, Bhumi or Patala with his glance, his smile, his beautiful face with its arched brows? We mean less than nothing to him, whose padadhuli Sri Lakshmi herself adores.'

After a pause, another woman said thoughtfully, 'Yet, he is called Uttamasloka, famed for being glorious. But go and tell him that I said he shall deserve that name only when he spares his thought and care for the wretched and the suffering, like us.'

The big black bee now flew down to her feet, as if to ask her forgiveness. The woman stepped away from it and cried, 'Get away, don't you dare lay your head at my feet! I know you too well, you cunning rogue, your master Mukunda has taught you well – the smooth ways of diplomacy, while in fact you are as untrustworthy as he is.

Wretched creature, don't you know we sacrificed everything for his love? Our husbands and children we have abandoned for him, in this life, and any hope of heaven in the one to come. Yet he did not think twice before leaving us; what hope is there of reconciling with such a cruel ingrate?

We know about his previous lives, don't we? As the Dasarathi Rama, savage as a hunter that wants flesh, he killed Vali, the monkey king, with an arrow from hiding. Surpanaka loved him at first sight, but when she made advances to him, he mutilated her horribly, because he was so under his wife Sita's spell.

Like a crow gobbles the bali offerings at a bhuta yagna for dead spirits, he devoured great Mahabali's worship and offerings. Then he thrust that matchless king of dharma down into Patala, into the deepest cave in the under world. We have had enough of friendship with him, Krishna who is as black on the inside as he is without.'

Now she paused, and fetched a great sad sigh. 'But ah, how can we ever forget everything he did, how wonderful he was when he was with us? Such a dangerous one! The Paramahamsas of this world might sip but a drop from the nectar, which is the lore of his deeds. They renounce their homes and their grief-stricken families and become ascetics, living as birds do, in dhyana, thinking always of him.

O messenger, black bee, let us speak of other things. For we innocent gopikas trusted Krishna's crafty protestations of love even as the gullible does, the mates of the black antelope, do the enchanting notes of the hunter's call. We have felt the sweet pangs of his fingernails upon our breasts, our bodies. The doe enticed by the hunter dies but once by his arrow, but we will suffer for our foolishness for the rest of our lives.'

The bee either fell silent, or flew away for a brief while before returning to her. 'O precious friend of our beloved! Have you come back? Did our love send you to us again? What have you come seeking from us? Ah, tell me! I adore you, sweet messenger, and you can have anything you ask from me. But how will you ever take us to him, when our rival in love is always by his side? Why, she dwells in him, in his breast, the Devi Lakshmi. So we must continue only to suffer, and to be away from him.'

Then she said in a more soothing tone, still speaking to the bee, never directly to Uddhava, 'Gentle black creature, friend of our Lord, is our gopa chief's son back from his Guru Sandipani's asrama. Is he in Mathura now? Does he remember his father's house here in Vraja or his people, the gopas? Does he remember us, his love slaves, ever, for even a moment?

Oh, when will I ever feel his hand, fragrant as aguru, on my head again?'

Moved to hear the gopis, and to see how mad they were with love for Krishna, with grief at not seeing him, Uddhava consoled the women. 'Listen to me, gopikas, you have found the highest gift life has to offer, and the world must adore you – for you have surrendered utterly to Vaasudeva, the Lord.

Commonly, Rishis tread the path toward bhakti with several rituals of piety – charity, vows of abstinence, chanting the names of God, yagnas, the study of the Shastras, and restraining the wild senses. You have hardly observed any of these. Yet I see the most exceptional bhakti in you, an unequalled love for Krishna, the holiest One – a devotion so absolute that not many of the greatest Rishis can claim to have it.

It is your greatest good fortune, gopis, that you have chosen Krishna, the Paramapurusha, over your children and husbands, your families, your homes, and even your own bodies. You have found absolute bhakti, of body, mind and spirit.

Gopis, this physical separation from him has perfected your love, and I feel blessed to have glimpsed its intensity. Holiest of women, listen to the message your love sent to you, and I am sure you will be pleased. I am the one that looks after his most private affairs, and he sent me to Gokula to bring you this message.

The Lord says to you, "You are never away from me, for I am the universe in which you dwell, I am your inmost soul. The five elements, the Panchmahabhuta – earth, water, fire, air and sky – pervade everything that has emerged from them. So, also, I, who am the First Cause, pervade all this samsara, the mind, prana, the elements, the senses, the gunas, and all, all that exists.

With my mayashakti, and with the bhutas, the indriyas, and the gunas, I create, sustain and dissolve all things within myself. All things are but various forms of me. The Atman remains forever pristine, pure, and immaculate consciousness. He, the Soul, is distinct from the body, the mind, and the gunas, unconcerned by their creation and dissolution.

The Atman appears as three kinds of reflections of the mind, Viswa, Taijasa, and Prajna, in the states of sleep, dream, and waking. These states are not direct experiences, but creations of maya.

A person should strive vigilantly to fathom and control his waking mind, which thirsts after sensual enjoyment and pursues the objects of the senses. For even as dreams are dispelled at waking, so too is the universe of the senses and the mind at the dawn of spiritual illumination.

The single aim of all the Vedas is to conquer the senses. Numberless rivers seek the ocean as their single goal. So do yoga, samkhya, Sannyasa, dhyana, tapasya, the observance of truth, restraint, and all the streams of the spirit seek mastery over the senses and the mind as their ocean.

I am keeping away from you in the flesh, so you can meditate more fully upon me within your hearts, where I am always, so that you find true communion beyond that of the body and the mind. As every woman knows, her mind dwells more intently and ceaselessly on her lover when he is away from her, rather than when they are together.

Let your minds be without any other thought except of me, and let your hearts flow into me entirely. This is the swiftest way to find me, and to keep me forever. Surely, you have not forgotten the gopikas that could not come into Vrindavana where I made love to the rest of you during the nights of the Raasa Kridha. They gave up their bodies, thinking only of me, and they are one with me, always." '

When the gopikas heard Krishna's message and, most of all, that he loved them, the women felt him near them, and they felt their hearts go fast, as if they would burst for joy. All the beautiful old memories welled up, as if the past was happening again. They saw Krishna before their eyes, heard his voice, felt his every caress.

Their faces shining, the gopis said to Uddhava, 'How fortunate that Kamsa, enemy and persecutor of the Yadavas, is dead, and also his friends and followers! We are delighted that Achyuta achieved his purpose, and now lives happily, reunited with his natural family.'

But another gopi said, 'Honoured Kshatriya, tell us, when the beautiful city women favour him with their soft, shy, and seductive glances and smiles, surely Balarama's brother gives them the love that belongs to us? Yes, there is no doubt about it. For we know what a great and expert lover he is, and, fascinated by their charm and their sophistication, he must be the darling of the noblewomen of Mathura.'

The mood was catching, and another gypsy woman said, 'Respected Uddhava, while he busies himself with the city women, does he ever spare a thought for the poor village women of Gokula, where he once ruled? Does he ever recall the moonlit nights we spent with him inside Vrindavana, the silvery air filled with the scent of night-blooming lilies and jasmine flowers? Does he remember the Raasalila that we danced with him, our anklets tinkling, our voices raised in songs in praise of him? Does he remember how he made magical love with us?'

'Now he is Lord of the Yadavas. Will he ever come back to Vraja to lay his divine hands on us? We are parched and wilting, in anguish for him. Will he come to revive us with his loving touch, as Indra does a dry forest in scorching summer with his rain?'

Another young woman said, 'Why do you imagine for a moment that he will ever return to Gokula? His enemy Kamsa, and his cohorts, are all dead, and the kingdom fallen into Krishna's hands! He will marry as many royal princesses as he likes, and live happily amidst his Yadava kin.

He lived here with us, as long as he could not live in Mathura. He has no reason to come here anymore.'

Another gopika said, 'I do not agree. Krishna is the Lord of Sri Devi. He is beyond desire, absorbed forever in the bliss of his Atman. What use has such a one for women of the forest like us, or for the noblest princesses?

No, he is beyond us all, and it is best for us to forget him, to stop pining for him as we do. Even Pingala, the famed whore of Mithila, the Guru of Avadhuta, said that to be without desire is the only way to peace.'

Another sighed, 'We all know that is wise. But oh, we cannot overcome our love for him, our constant desire for him. Who can forget the memories with which he has left us – he of universal renown, to whom Sri Lakshmi always clings, though he is scarcely attached to her!'

'Noble Uddhava,' said another beauty, 'this river Kalindi, this Mount Govardhana, this Vrindavana, these cows, the flute songs in this place – all these remind us only of Krishna, ranging these forests and pastures with his brother Rama. Oh, we cannot tell you how they remind us of Nanda's son!

Everywhere we see his footprints, in which Sri Lakshmi dwells; how can we forget him? He stole our hearts with his charm, his mischievous looks, his magnificent gait, his sweet talk and his incomparable smile. How, how will we ever forget him?'

Now they cried out all together, in an ecstasy, 'Lord! Lord of Sri! O Lord of Vraja! O dispeller of grief! Master of the herd! Gokula sinks in a sea of sorrow, only you can save us, come, O Krishna, and rescue us from drowning!'

Yet, the message that Uddhava brought from Krishna softened their anguish at being apart from Krishna. The gopis made the Yadava nobleman welcome; they honoured him. When they thought about the message Uddhava brought, they began to have mystic insight – that Krishna was indeed the Supreme Spirit, God himself resplendent in their own hearts.

Uddhava stayed in Gokula for some months, to comfort the gopis. He was a gifted man, a great bhakta, and he enthralled Vraja with some magnificent poems and songs about the life and the deeds of Krishna. To the gopas and gopis those months passed as just some moments, for day and night they talked of nothing but the Dark One, whom they loved and missed so much.

Hari's messenger Uddhava made the most of his stay, wandering through enchanted Vrindavana, coming to the banks of its sparkling rivers and clear, lotus-laden lakes, exploring its hills and valleys, discovering cool caves. At times, he would come abruptly upon a whole wood shimmering with the most exotic flowers.

Most of all, each of these places and sights bore some legend of Krishna, and the gopis, who accompanied him on his wandering, would relive those memories vividly for him. At such times, the women would fall into a trance, a transport of grief, thinking of their blue lover; and watching them, Uddhava's delight knew no bounds.

He, a highborn kshatriya, composed a song for the ardent gypsy women.

'Etaan param tanubhrito bhuvi gopavadhvo Govinda eva nikhilaatmani roodhabhaava;

Vanchhanti yad bhavabhiyo manuyo vayam ca kim brahmajanma abhiranänta katharasya...

The gopis are the only ones that have achieved the true purpose of a human birth into this world. For their hearts know such an agony of love for Govinda, who is the soul of everything that exists...

What they have attained is what all of us aspire to – seekers of moksha that fear the torments of samsara, the Rishis of wisdom and illumination, and us humble bhaktas. Yet, the rest of us only aspire but never find it.

Ah, of what use is a high or noble birth, as a brahmana or a kshatriya? What use the upanayanam or the initiation into the Gayatri mantra? Why, what point is it being born as four-faced Brahma himself, if one is not drunk with love for the Infinite Lord, mad to listen to his names and his deeds.

Finally, only this fervour for the Brahman counts. Look at this marvellous contrast – these nomadic, promiscuous gypsy women are the Lord's chosen ones! For no one adores Krishna as absolutely as they do. Surely, it is true that he gives himself to those that love him like this, madly, entirely, body and spirit, even if they have not the faintest notion of who he is from studying any Veda or other scripture.

Truly, this love is like amrita, the king of all specifics, which cures a sick man, even if he takes it without knowing what it is.

Not the Apsaras of heaven, whose skins are coloured and scented like lotuses, not Sri Lakshmi, his consort, ever enjoyed the Lord as intimately as these gopis have. How I envy them the Raasa dance, when he wrapped his dark arms round their necks, made love to them every way they wanted, and fulfilled the purpose of their lives!

I would be born as the lowest shrub, plant, creeper or blade of grass in Vrindavana, so the dust from the feet of these blessed women falls on me. They abandoned the bondage of every filial attachment; they abandoned the noble way of chastity, the path of the good, to dance with Krishna, whom the Vedas and their adherents seek – to become his lovers and bhaktas in Vrindavana.

These gopis slaked their burning thirst by setting his feet on their naked breasts during the Raasalila – the lotus feet, which the Devi Sri worships, the Lord Brahma, and the greatest Yogins, who have no desires left.

Again and again I worship the dust from the feet of these gopikas of Nanda's Vraja, whose lusty singing about the glories of Hari sanctifies the three worlds.'

Then, one day, Uddhava bid tender, loving farewell to the gopis, who had become as his dearest friends, to Yasodha and Nanda, the other gopas, and the scion of the Dasaarhas climbed into his chariot to leave Gokula.

Before he set out, Nanda and the others all brought him fine gifts, and spoke to him with the greatest affection. Fervently, they said, 'May all our thoughts cling to the sacred feet of Krishna. May our speech be devoted to chanting his names. May our bodies and all that they do be in his service, always.

Wherever our karma takes us, or God's will, into whatever birth in whichever species, may our love for Krishna be constant and eternal, for we dedicate all our punya from all our births to just that goal.'

After this unusual, solemn, and almost ritual farewell, Uddhava rode back to Mathura, which now Krishna protected. He prostrated at Krishna's feet, and told him, still with wonder, about the passionate devotion and love of the people of Vraja.

The gifts that Nanda and the gopas had given him Uddhava gave to Balarama."

TRIVAKRA AND AKRURA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "ONE DAY IN MATHURA, KRISHNA, SOUL OF ALL beings, seer of all things, remembered the promise he had made to Trivakra, Kamsa's hunchbacked sairandhri and masseuse, on the day he pulled her crooked back straight. He remembered her loving, lustful invitation to him to visit her and, resolving to satisfy her yearning, went to her home one evening, taking Uddhava with him.

Trivakra's was a sprawling, opulent house of pleasure, lavishly furnished, with panels that depicted explicit scenes from the kamashastras. The air was laden with aphrodisiac perfumes, musks, and incense as well. Strings of pearls hung everywhere, as did fragrant garlands of flowers. The tasteful chairs and deep couches were covered in resonant silk. Soft lamps burned.

Trivakra saw Krishna and came running to welcome him, her face flushed with excitement, her heart pounding, and her eyes shining. Her women around her, she received Krishna with great honour, and led him to a thronelike chair.

She welcomed Uddhava with equal regard and reverence, and showed him to a similar seat. Out of respect for Krishna, that he could never sit in as exalted a place as the Lord, Uddhava only touched the lofty chair with his palm, to acknowledge Trivakra's hospitality. He sat on the floor at Krishna's feet.

Krishna did not sit for long in the living room, but rose and walked into the bedchamber. Trivakra bathed, anointed her fine limbs with sandalwood paste, put on her finest clothes, ornaments, and perfumes, wove fresh mallika flowers in her hair, and made her mouth fragrant by chewing a betel leaf. She went to Krishna, waiting for her, with a carafe of heady wine.

She was shy, she was so excited her hands shook; love and desire surged in her like some sea in storm. Krishna called her to the bed. Quivering, afraid for the power of his presence, she hesitated. Then, surrendering, she went to him. He took her hands, their wrists heavy with golden bangles, and made her sit beside him.

He took her in his arms. She knew this was sweet payment for the oils and unguents she had given him in the street, when he first arrived in Mathura. She knelt before him, and baring herself, pressed his sacred feet to her breasts, her lips, and her eyes, cooling the fever that raged within her.

She sniffed those feet in rapture, then she could not wait anymore but clasped him between her naked breasts, and he, the Avatara of final bliss, made love to her, as she had never dreamt. When she was quiet after the awesome tumult, she seized his hand and whispered to the God of gods, 'Oh my love! I beg you, stay with me for some days and make love to me day and night! Lotus-eyed Krishna, I cannot live without you.'

The wise would say that only someone of inferior intelligence would ask for such a trifling and fleeting boon, of carnal love, and perhaps that is true. But Krishna, who grants all boons, did as she asked. He stayed in her house of pleasure for some days and nights, and made love to her constantly, with unearthly tenderness and virility.*

Another day, after his stay with Trivakra, Krishna decided to keep another promise he had made before he killed Kamsa. Taking Uddhava and Balarama, also, with him, he went to the home of Akrura. He went partly to visit the Yadava nobleman, and partly with a mission in mind:

Akrura saw his kinsmen coming, and ran out of his house to embrace them in the street. He prostrated before Rama and Krishna, and they raised him up and embraced him affectionately. He brought them into his home, made them sit in the finest chairs, and now offered them ritual, loving worship.

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* In his *Narayaneeyam*, Narayana Bhattatiri says that a child was born to Trivakra by Krishna. She named him Upasloka, and he composed the tales of the marvelous Panchatantra. However, the Bhagavata Purana does not mention this.

Rajan, he washed the brothers' feet, and sprinkled that water over his head. He made offerings of madhurparka, sandalwood paste, flowers, perfumes and rare spices and unguents, as well as costly cloths and garments. Again, he prostrated himself, then sat at their feet, which he took into his lap and began to massage them.

As he pressed Krishna's feet, the humble Akrura said, 'It is our great fortune that you have killed Kamsa and his friends. You have rescued the Vrishnis from untold suffering, and they now prosper.

Rama and you are Purusha and Prakriti, the cause of this world, as well as this world's manifestation. Apart from you, nothing exists, no cause and no effect. The universe is your projection of yourself, by your shakti, and no other agency. You pervade the cosmos and everything in it; the endless forms that different senses and the mind perceive are all just you.

The Panchamabhuta, the primeval elements, exist in their pristine condition, unaltered, yet appear as a plethora of objects and beings. So, too, your nature remains forever a pure and resplendent Spirit, boundless, free and without taint, while the relative universe, which you pervade, is founded in you.

By the three gunas, rajas, sattva, and tamas, which are triune aspects of your shakti, you create, preserve and destroy. These transformations are based upon your maya, not your Atman, and they neither bind nor affect you. What can bind you, when you are pure and eternal Consciousness?

Since the body has no independent existence in final reality, the jiva is never bound by birth or by death. Obviously, then, you the Supreme Soul are never born and never die. You are Immaculate Spirit, and only our erudite ignorance projects these relative and temporal concepts upon what our intellects cannot grasp.

Whenever the ancient path of illumination, which you have revealed through the ages, is imperilled by evil and by atheists, you incarnate in the world in a body of sattva. Lord, now you have come again, with your brother Rama. Born into Vasudeva's clan, Janardana, there is no one as fortunate as we are, that you, whom the greatest Yogis and the Devas hardly find, have come yourself to our home! Lord, I beg you, sever the bonds from my heart, the attachments of your maya – for my wife and son, my wealth, my elders, this house, and this mortal body.'

Thus, Akrura worshipped Krishna. When he finished, the Lord spoke smilingly to his devotee, in a tone that melted the Vrishni nobleman's heart completely.

Krishna said, 'You are always our revered elder, our uncle, and our venerable kinsman. We are as your children, your wards that you must love and protect. Those that care for their own true welfare must always serve great men like you. I say to you even the Devas are selfish, and not as noble or as holy as you.

Truly, the sacred tirthas purify any man that bathes in them. Images of God in mud and stone do bless those that worship them. Yet, the blessings of these need a long time to take effect, while seeing a holy one like yourself burns away a man's sins instantly.

Of all my friends, my wellwishers, you have the first place. I need a favour from you, Akrura. I want to learn something of how our cousins, the Pandavas, are, for I want to support their cause. Will you be kind enough to go to Hastinapura, capital of the Kuru kingdom?

We heard that when Pandu died, his brother, the Kuru king Dhritarashtra, brought his grieving widow Kunti and her five sons to his city. I fear that, being blind and weak-minded, Dhritarashtra will be ruled by his evil sons, and he will not treat his nephews, the Pandavas, as well as he should.

I beg you, go to Hastinapura, and discover for yourself if the king there treats his dead brother's sons well. They are our cousins, too, for Kunti Devi is a Yadava, and my father Vasudeva's cousin. We must know how they fare, before we can decide what we can do to help them.'

When he had asked Akrura to go as his envoy to the Kuru capital, Krishna returned to his palace with Balarama and Uddhava."

AKRURA'S MISSION

SRI SUKA SAID, "AKRURA LEFT AT ONCE FOR HASTINAPURA, WHERE THE noble and glorious kings of the great line of Puru had ruled since the dawn of the race of kshatriyas. He met the elders of that Royal House – the patriarch Bheeshma, King Dhritarashtra, Vidura, Kunti Devi, and some others too.

Akrura met Baahveeka, his son Somadatta, Acharya Drona, Drona's son Aswathama, Acharya Kripa, Karna, the king's demonic son Duryodhana, and of course Pandu's sons, the Pandavas. The genial Akrura mingled freely with all these, at his ease in their court. Striking up conversations, he casually enquired after all his old friends that lived in Hastinapura. The friends he met, in turn, asked after his wellbeing.

Akrura spent some months in Dhritarashtra's city, so he could acquaint himself with what was happening there, in some depth. He saw straightaway that, exactly as Krishna had said, Dhritarashtra was indeed weak, ruled by his villainous sons, especially the eldest, Duryodhana, and Duryodhana's bosom friend, the powerful and haughty Karna.

From Vidura and Kunti, Akrura learnt that Dhritarashtra's sons were dangerously jealous of dead Pandu and Kunti's sons. The Pandavas were handsome and strong, gifted, brave, modest and humble. The people of Hastinapura adored Pandu's sons, and Dhritarashtra's princes, Duryodhana and the Kauravas, plotted to kill them.

Even when they were just boys, the king's sons tried to poison their cousins. They still hatched murderous schemes, regularly, and it seemed that some God watched over the Pandavas that they escaped with their lives.

One day, Kunti came to visit her cousin Akrura in private, while he sat alone with Pandu and Dhritarashtra's third brother, the wise Vidura. Sobbing, she blurted her anxiety to him.

'Ah my brother, do my father and mother, my sisters, nephews, the ladies of the court at Mathura, and my other friends ever think of me? They say my brother Vasudeva's son, Krishna of the lotus eyes, is the Avatara, the refuge of all, and that he loves his bhaktas. Does he think of his aunt's sons, his cousins? Does his brother, the mighty Rama, remember them?

Oh Akrura, I am full of fear and sorrow, as a doe among ravenous wolves. After my husband died my sons and I have been surrounded by enemies. Will Krishna come to Hastinapura to console me?'

Kunti broke down, and cried piteously, 'O Krishna, Krishna! Soul of the world, in whom every power is vested! Creator of the universe, O quest of all the scriptures! Ah Krishna, save my children and me, for we are in terrible distress and danger.

I have no sanctuary except at your holy feet, which bestow moksha. For you are the final Lord, only you can save me from samsara and the terror of death. I prostrate before you, Krishna, boundless one, saviour of jivas, master of yoga, who are pure and eternal Chitta. Save me, Lord, I seek refuge in you!'

Rajan, your great grandmother, the Devi Kunti, sobbed her fears to her cousin Akrura, and called out in anguish to Krishna, master of the universe. Vidura and Akrura pacified Kunti as best they could; they reminded her that her sons were no ordinary princes, but sons of Devas, born into the world for a great mission of destiny.

Just before he returned to Mathura, Akrura went to see Dhritarashtra. The blind king doted excessively on his sons, and for this reason discriminated against his brother's princes. Other prominent Kurus sat with Dhritarashtra, when Akrura spoke to him about the mission on which Krishna and Rama had sent him to Hastinapura.

Akrura began, 'O mighty son of Vichitraveerya, who have spread the renown of the House of Kuru! Maharaja Dhritarashtra, if you rule with dharma as your sceptre, if you make your people happy by your immaculate character and your love for them, and if you treat your brother Pandu's sons with the same affection that you do your own princes, you will certainly find vast fame.

However, if you do not observe dharma, you will bring disrepute upon yourself in this world, and find hell in the one to come. So, look with equal love and favour upon your sons and the sons of Pandu.

In this life, no one is a permanent companion. A man must part from his own body, what then of his wife or sons? Every creature is born alone, and dies alone. Each being enjoys his own punya and suffers for his paapa – alone. Little fish, swarming offspring, use up the water that sustains their parents. So, too, a foolish man's wife and children, pretending to love him, consume his ill-gotten wealth, or others do.

As long as a man supports his body, his wealth, and his family, abandoning dharma to do this, the greed and attachment that drive him will cause his downfall. The very objects of his solicitude will abandon him, by betrayal and by death. Abandoned by the very ones for whom he left the way of truth, the man turned to evil passes on without attaining any of life's purusharthas. He finds hell for himself.

Therefore, O King, you must realise that this world is a dream, a magic show, a reverie, and restrain the passions of your mind with discrimination. Thus, become impartial and even minded in every situation.'

Dhritarashtra replied, 'Akrura, lord of gifts, famed for your generosity, your sage counsel is like amrita to me, and I am like the man who drinks it and can never feel he has enough. Yet, noble Akrura, your wisdom makes no lasting impression upon my fickle mind, always influenced by my love for my sons – even as the streak of lightning makes no impact upon the mountain.

No one can change the will of the Supreme Lord, who has incarnated in the Yadava clan to purge the earth of the forces of evil. I salute that God, who brought this world into being by his inscrutable and mysterious maya, who governs it by the law of karma. His impenetrable lila is this transmigratory wheel of life, and its final end – Himself.'

Having listened to Dhritarashtra, Akrura bid farewell to his friends and relatives in Hastinapura, and rode home to Mathura, city of the Yadavas. There, he went directly to meet Krishna and Rama, and told them whatever he had learnt in Hastinapura – Dhritarashtra's discrimination against the sons of Pandu, and his lack of remorse for it.

Thus Akrura accomplished the mission for which he had been sent to the capital of the Kurus."

JARASANDHA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "O NOBLE SCION OF BHARATA'S LINE, KAMSA HAD two wives, Asti and Prapti. When Krishna killed their husband, they fled to their father's house in grief, and told him what had transpired in Mathura. Their father, the mighty Jarasandha, king of Magadha, swore he would wipe the Yadavas from the face of the earth.

Jarasandha mustered an army of twenty-three aksauhinis*, and laid siege to Mathura, surrounding the capital of the Yadavas. The people of Mathura panicked. Krishna, who of course was Hari, the Lord of infinite prowess come as man for a great purpose, looked out at the immense force that ringed Mathura.

Calmly, he thought about how he would embark upon his great and terrible destiny, now yawning clearly before him, this new phase in his unprecedented life. 'This vast force is one of the burdens of the Earth, and I have come to destroy such burdens and make Bhumi Devi lighter. Jarasandha has brought many aksauhinis to our gates: evil forces, his own as well as those led by kings that are his allies.

I will raze this army, but, I think, spare Jarasandha's life. For then he will gather more demon legions, bring them again to Mathura, and serve my purpose. I have come to rid the Earth of her burden of these vicious and arrogant men. Who better than Jarasandha to help me accomplish what I have come for?'

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* An aksauhini is a legion of 21,870 chariots, as many elephants, 65,610 horses, and 109,350 footsoldiers.

Memories of previous incarnations rose in his mind, when he had come in other guises to quell great evil risen to dominate the earth. The forms of evil were also different in different ages; now they were these savage hordes, these waves of asuric warriors, who surged around Mathura and cried fell taunts and threats to the frightened people within.

As Krishna stood on a rampart, plunged in thought, two brilliant chariots flashed down from the sky. Each had its charioteer, and both were as bright as suns and laden with every manner of unearthly weapon.

Krishna saw the chariots, and they were familiar; he knew them well through ages. He turned to Balarama, standing at his side, 'My invincible brother, you are the protector of the Yadavas now. Look, here is your chariot from heaven, the one you know, and in it lie all your timeless astras. Mighty Balarama; decimate the legions of darkness massed at our gates, and save our people from danger. Isn't this what you have been born for, to destroy the evil and protect the innocent?

A new phase in our lives is upon us; let us lighten the Earth's burden by these twenty-three aksauhinis of evil.'

Balarama's eyes blazed in anticipation of war; he remembered clearly who he was and why he had been born. The brothers picked up the silvery sets of armour, light as the breeze, which lay in the chariots, and strapped them on. Each one climbed into his ratha, and with just a small legion behind them, emerged from the gates of Mathura to confront the sea of brutal men massed outside the city.

Krishna raised his conch, the Panchajanya, and blew a blast on it like age-ending thunder. A wave of shock swept through the enemy, and they trembled.

Jarasandha looked at Rama and Krishna, side by side in their chariots. The master of Magadha called out in fury, 'Krishna, scoundrel, villain, murderer of my daughters' husband! But you are just a boy of tender years, and by yourself, and I cannot fight you. You are a coward, raised hidden from the world, in secret. I say to you, little boy, run while you can!

As for you, O Rama, if you have the stomach for a fight, come. But I warn you, either you kill me in battle, or I cut you to shreds with my arrows, and send your soul into heaven.'

Krishna replied quietly, resonantly, 'Real kshatriyas do not brag, but show their valour and manliness by their deeds. To me your words are the pitiful moans of a dying man.'

Jarasandha and his legions surrounded Krishna, Rama and their paltry army, like a storm covers the sun with clouds, or dust covers a fire. Watching from the ramparts, the women of Mathura trembled; they wept when they could no longer see the banners that Rama and Krishna's chariots flew, with the signs of the palm-tree and the eagle.

Krishna saw his small Yadava army mantled in enemy arrows. He picked up Vishnu's bow, the awesome Saringa that the Devas and Asuras revere, and pulled on its string. The Earth shook, and the Jarasandha's demon army quailed.

Strapping on his inexhaustible quiver, which welled with arrows and astras, he began to shoot back at the enemy, quicker than thought, quicker than the eye could see. At chariot, elephant, horse and footsoldier he loosed his incendiary shafts – all round him, in the same instant, at once! His archery was like a firebrand being whirled round, making an unbroken circle of flames.

And all around him they fell in thousands, in an eyeflash – elephants, their heads shattered, horses with necks spouting blood where their heads had been severed, chariots smashed, their warriors and sarathies dead, and numberless footsoldiers, dismembered, beheaded.

Blood from man and beast ran across the field in rivulets. As these swelled they carried men's arms like red watersnakes, heads like scarlet tortoises. Fallen elephants were islets in the crimson streams, dead horses crocodiles, hands cut off were fish, scalps with long hair water hyacinths, bows were wavelets in the current, and swords and lances were reeds. Round weapons, like the discus, were whirlpools in death's river, and the jewels that dead warriors wore were pebbles that sank under horrible currents of blood.

Surely, the incredible spectacle on the battlefield outside Mathura excited brave men and terrified cowards.

Meanwhile, Balarama waded into the enemy army, and he was an implacable force of nature, with his halayudha, his ploughshare weapon. This occult weapon also spewed a thousand flames and spat a million swords in every direction. In as much time as it takes to tell, Vasudeva's godly sons razed Jarasandha's oceanic army.

When they speak of that unbelievable battle outside Mathura, the knowing say that for the Lord, who creates, nurtures and destroys the universe, annihilating Jarasandha's teeming army was certainly no great accomplishment. Yet, the brothers, in human guise, astounded those that watched the rout that day, and gave poets something to sing about for ages to come!

As one lion seizes another, Balarama seized Jarasandha, who was as big as himself. Shocked by the devastation of his legions, the king of Magadha hardly offered any resistance. Balarama bound him in ropes, and with battlelust high in his veins and no other enemy left to kill, he was about to despatch Jarasandha when Krishna prevented him, saying there were many more armies the Magadhan had to muster and bring to the gates of Mathura, for them to slaughter.

Balarama let Jarasandha go. Head hung, trembling for shame, he stalked away through the corpses of his men and beasts, through ankle-deep blood. He felt so shattered that he resolved to live in the jungle, and become a Sannyasi. He set out, not for his capital Girivraja, but a forest on the way, when a group of kings, his allies who had also managed to flee the massacre, found him.

With lofty arguments, though their hearts were set on very mundane considerations, they convinced him to abandon the course he had chosen. They said to him it was only some grievous karma from another life which had caused his defeat, and no weakness or worthlessness in himself. The next time, he would surely take revenge.

Sullen and grim, Jarasandha returned to his kingdom and Girivraja.

When Krishna and Rama razed the army of demonic men that Jarasandha brought against them, not a Yadava life was lost in the encounter. The Devas poured showers of scented flowers down on the Avatara out of their heavens. Their earlier terror having melted away like mist, the people of Mathura came pouring out of the city gates to honour the divine brothers.

Singing and dancing they came, with heralds, bards, and singers that sang ecstatic praises of the two. Booming conches, batteries of every sort of drum, horns and trumpets marked Krishna's triumphal return into the city. Vina, flute and mridanga played, as he walked through highways hastily washed and sprinkled with scented holy water, and ichor from the temples of elephants.

The people of Mathura thronged the streets, not a citizen stayed home, and mingling with the music and the crowd's general din, the sound of the Vedas being chanted by the brahmanas of Mathura rose auspicious into the sky. Quickly erected archways, flags, banners, bright garlands, festoons, pitchers of holy water at every door and gate – all these adorned the festive city along the route of the victory march.

As Krishna and Rama progressed toward the king's palace, women sprinkled drops of curd over them in blessing and gratitude; they flung armfuls of flowers over them, and unbroken grains of rice and tender green sprouts. The women's eyes shone with adoration and some desire, certainly, and the air rang with their excited shouts. All of them looked at Rama and Krishna unwinkingly, joy and ineffable love coursing through their hearts.

Laden in chariots and carts, Krishna brought the spoils of the battle against the twenty-three aksauhinis, the armour, helmets, weapons, and jewellery of their slain enemies, solemnly to Ugrasena, king of the Yadus.

This was by no means the last army that Jarasandha would bring to the gates of Mathura for Balarama and Krishna to sacrifice to the god of death. No less than seventeen times did Jarasandha come to the gates of Mathura, each time with twenty-three aksauhinis. Each time Krishna and his Yadavas slaughtered them, sparing only one enemy life – Jarasandha's own.

Obsessed by Krishna, and the thought of vanquishing and killing him, Jarasandha mustered his eighteenth army, when a new and powerful ally joined forces with him. Narada went to the awesome Kalayavana, the Black Greek, and told him how Krishna had humiliated the king of Magadha seventeen times.

Kalayavana believed that no warrior on earth was his equal, but Narada whispered subtly to him that Krishna and his Yadavas were certainly worthy adversaries. Kalayavana's immense army consisted mainly of mlechha mercenaries, aliens from beyond the borders of Bharatavarsha. He marched on Mathura with an army numbering three and a half crores, thirty-five millions.

Krishna and Balarama looked out of their city and saw that stupendous force outside Mathura. Now they grew concerned.

Krishna said, 'This Yavana has appeared out of the blue with his massive legions. If they attack today or tomorrow, and Jarasandha arrives with his army, the Magadhan will storm our city and slaughter all our people.'

Balarama murmured, 'Would that we had an impregnable fortress, and an ally to kill this Black Greek.'

Krishna's eyes lit up. He said, 'We shall have both!'

With his divine power, he raised up twelve square yojanas of land out at sea, and created a marvellous fortified city at its heart. Great arterial highways ran across the new city, connected by tributary roads and streets. Mansions and other fine houses stood on either side of these, and all this reflected the unearthly genius of Viswakarman, the architect of Devaloka!

Magnificent parks and gardens dotted the city in the sea, with trees, plants and vines that grew in Indra's Nandana in heaven.

The palaces and mansions had lofty roofs and domes of gold and crystal, kissing the sky. They had sprawling chambers, with walls of beaten silver and gold, while diamonds encrusted their golden domes, and emeralds studded their courtyards. Wooden balconies beside these domes were for bathing in the light of the moon, while the sea sang all around.

Here and there, you saw the most exquisite temples, in which the Yadavas would worship their Gods. Of course, the city was divided into beautiful precincts for the four varnas, and the nobility of the Yadava clan had the most magnificent mansions and palaces.

Indra adorned the garden of Krishna's own palace with the Parijata, tree of wishes. He gifted his own sabha, the splendid Sudharma, into which no hunger or thirst entered. Varuna gifted Krishna a stable of snow-white horses, all quick as birds, every one having just one dark ear.

Kubera brought the eight great treasures, and the Lokapalas and the other guardian deities of the Earth declared all their power, wealth and resources to be at his disposal, whenever he had need of them. In short, all the power and kingdom the Lord Vishnu had given these Gods, they surrendered upto him, when he incarnated as a man.

The city in the ocean was called Dwaraka, and Krishna magically transported the people of Mathura to his new and fabulous capital. Once they were safely ensconced in their new home, they roamed the wondrous streets of Dwaraka in joy and awe, and Krishna himself returned to deserted Mathura.

He left word with Balarama, who had charge of administering Dwaraka, allotting homes and giving out wealth to the people, in accordance with their status and individual stature. Returning to Mathura, Krishna carried no weapon, wore just a garland of lotuses as armour, and went to face Kalayavana, the dreaded Black Greek."

MUCHUKUNDA FINDS GRACE

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "KALAYAVANA SAW KRISHNA EMERGE FROM A side gate of Mathura. He was radiant as the rising full moon, his skin dark blue, and he wore bright yellow silk. The Srivatsa adorned his chest, as did the Kaustubha ruby. Krishna was four-armed now, as Vishnu always is, and his eyes were reddish, also like the God's.

His face shone with grace, and a cheerful smile lit it. He was incredibly handsome, and wore shimmering earrings, alligator-shaped.

Kalayavana looked at the figure before him, and thought, 'He has the mark of the Srivatsa, four arms, and eyes as long as lotus petals. He wears many vanamalas and is as handsome as a Deva. This must be Krishna, for this is how Narada described him. He has come out of Mathura on foot, and he does not carry a weapon. I shall also fight him without a weapon.'

He saw that Krishna, whom not even Yogis can capture in their hearts, appeared to be stealing away, his face averted. The Yavana went after him. Krishna broke into a run, and the heavily built Black Greek could hardly keep up with the pace he set. Krishna would allow him to draw quite near, then pull away again easily, so Kalayavana cursed and grew short of breath.

The Black Greek roared after his quarry, 'This is not how noble men fight. Coward, this flight does not become a Yadava warrior. Stand and face me, if you dare!'

At last, Krishna led his pursuer up a hill and to a cave set in its side. The truth was that Kalayavana's karma was not yet quite exhausted, so that he could die. But now Krishna darted into the cave, as if to hide. Panting, the huge Yavana followed him in. Kalayavana saw someone in the dimness, someone lying asleep on a slab of stone, at the heart of that wide cavern.

The Greek thought it was Krishna feigning sleep. In disgust, he snorted, 'You have made me run all this way, and now you lie there pretending to be asleep!'

He lunged forward in anger, and kicked the sleeping figure, which was not Krishna at all. At the kick, the figure awoke from his sleep of an age, opened his eyes, and saw Kalayavana standing before him. Rajan, the moment the sleeper's angry gaze fell upon Kalayavana, a flash of fire sprang from his body and burnt the Black Greek to ashes in a wink."

Parikshit asked, "Holy One, who was the sleeper in the cave who burnt up Kalayavana? What were his antecedents, whose son was he? How was he so powerful, and why was he asleep in the cave?"

Suka replied, "He was a king, once, born in the noble line of the Ikshvakus, in the royal House of the Sun. He was the son of Mandhata, and his name was Muchukunda. A king of dharma, he was devoted to the truth and to the Rishis of the world.

Once, bands of feral Asuras hunted the Sages, who sat in dhyana in the forests of Bharatavarsha and blessed the Holy Land with their constant prayers. The Devas were terrified by the power of the demons, and helpless; they begged Muchukunda to protect the Rishis. He did this for an age, gladly and without rest.

Finally, Siva's son Subrahmanya became the Senapati of the army of the Devas, and he assumed the mantle of protector of the hermits of the world. At last, the Gods and the Sages gave an exhausted Muchukunda leave to rest, to set down his burden of responsibility.

They said to him, 'You renounced everything, all your worldly pleasures, to protect us. All your queens, your sons, kinsmen, ministers, and your subjects have long since died. Time, which sports with all beings, shifting them from life to life like a cowherd moves his cattle from pasture to pasture, has swallowed them.

We wish you well, O Muchukunda! Choose any boon and you shall have it from us – any except moksha, for that is not ours to give. Only Mahavishnu can bestow nirvana upon a jiva.'

Muchukunda, who had not rested for a yuga, chose sleep as his boon, blissful uninterrupted slumber. The Devas and Rishis granted his boon, and he entered that cave and fell asleep upon a stone slab he found at its heart, standing there as if it was created just for him.

The grateful Devas said, 'If any man is foolish enough to wake you from your sleep, he shall be burned to ashes as soon as you open your eyes and look at him.'

When the fire from Muchukunda's body consumed Kalayavana, Krishna emerged from the inner recess of the cave. He revealed himself to the Ikshvaku king of old. Muchukunda saw him as Vishnu – four-armed, blue as a raincloud, wearing bright yellow silk, the Srivatsa curled on his chest, the Kaustubha shining beside it.

He wore a colourful vaijayanti garland; he was handsome past reason, his face radiant and the alligator earrings dangling from long lobes. Krishna was lustrous, he was entirely magnificent, and he radiated grace and love from his eyes and his smile. He was youthful and vibrant, and he walked up to Muchukunda with the gait of a lion.

Muchukunda saw the splendid one, who lit up the cave with divine light, and was awe-stricken. In a faltering voice, he said, 'Whom do I see before me? These mountains and caves are full of thorns, yet you walk barefoot here though your feet appear to be as tender as lotuses.

Are you just an embodiment of the splendour in every created being, or are you one of the great Devas – Surya, Indra, Soma, or one of the Lokapalas, perhaps? But I think you are Mahavishnu himself, Lord of the Trimurti, for you seem to be greater than any of the Devas.

Ah, the light of you dispels the blackness of this cave. Awesome One, I beg you, tell me everything about yourself, for my heart yearns to know to which family you belong, who your ancestors are, what your mighty deeds are, for surely they are legion! As for me, I am a kshatriya of the line of Ikshvaku. I am Yuvanasva's grandson, and Mandhata's son. After a life of keeping ceaseless vigil to protect the Sages of the forest, I fell asleep in this hidden cave, into sweet oblivion.

Now someone comes in here and wakes me up. He is burnt to ashes for his sin, and then you appear before me, splendid and majestic. Glorious One, the very sight of you overwhelms me, and I cannot look at you directly for too long. Surely, the world must worship you.'

Krishna replied in a voice as resonant as the rumbling of thunderclouds, 'Most honoured one, my births, my deeds, and my names are so many that not even I can recount them all. You might count the specks of dust upon this earth, if you are born several times; but not the number of my births, my names, or my attributes.

Great King, Sages who have been trying, through many lives, to count how many times I have incarnated myself through the ages, have not yet finished their calculation. Yet, let me tell you about this advent of mine.

Brahma came to me, to say that Asuras born as kshatriyas and other demons overran the sacred world. He said dharma was in danger of perishing entirely, unless Bhumi was rid of her burden. I have come to lighten the Earth's burden, by making rivers of blood flow here.

I incarnated myself in the house of Yadu, and I am called Vaasudeva. I slew the Asura Kalanemi, born as Kamsa of Mathura. I killed Pralamba, and many other devils in the wild. Now, O Rajan, the fire from your eyes has consumed Kalayavana.

Long ago, before you slept, you worshipped me devoutly. As I love my bhaktas, I came here to bless you. Rajarishi, choose any boon you want from me, and I will give you whatever you ask. No devotee of mine ever suffers, or comes to a bad end.'

Muchukunda's heart sang. From what the Rishi Garga once told him, he knew the visitor to his cave was the Lord Narayana himself. He prostrated at Krishna's feet, and spoke to him in a voice full of joy.

'In this world, deluded by your maya, men and women do not grasp the true nature of reality, the purpose of life. They fail to worship you. Deceiving themselves, they seek happiness in family life, which is the root of all suffering.

Only by God's grace is a jiva born as a healthy human being – for this is no easy attainment. Yet, they fall like beasts into the dark well of household life, with its mouth camouflaged.

Invincible One, until this moment, my life too was a wasted one. For until now, I also identified my Atman with my body, and lived in a long and complex dream, a castle in the air. Vain and proud I have been – that I was a king, the owner of vast territories and wealth. I lived every moment in vain anxiety, for my wife, my children, and my riches.

I am only a king if I identify myself with this body, which is no more than a pot or a well. Yet, how arrogant I was, being deeply convinced that I was a great king. Anywhere I went, chariots, horsemen, footsoldiers, elephants, and powerful military commanders surrounded me. In pomp, I used to go, and blinded by such pride that I never thought of you, never worshipped you.

Worldly matters, of kingdom, wealth, power, and sensual pleasures, all sprung from greed, absorbed me, so that I was oblivious of the spirit, and everything thereof. Just as a rat is easy prey for the fork-tongued snake, so is the man that ignores the life of the spirit and its values, a prey for death, for you come as death.

Time is your power, which reduces to ashes, to food for worms, or to filth, the body that moved about in ponderous majesty, wearing golden ornaments and priceless jewels, riding upon the backs of elephants, flowing ichor: as a king.

A kshatriya king conquers the kingdoms around him. He then sits upon his throne, receiving tribute and homage from his vassal kings. Yet, all that waits for him after his mighty deeds, is enslavement at the hands of the women in his harem. He becomes as their pet dog in his ceaseless, hopeless quest to satisfy his burgeoning lust.

Otherwise, he might not chase after sensual pleasures, but perform great yagnas, and be austere, thinking, "I shall become a greater emperor or even an Indra in my next life". Sadly, his obsession with rituals, performed out of his greed for power, will not allow him even a moment's simple happiness.

Jivas caught in the wheel of rebirths, associate with holy men, when their time for freedom approaches. For when they are drawn to such men, surely they are drawn, Lord, to you, who are the One that every Sage is seeking, who are the master of this universe of karma, of causes and effects.

You blessed me, dear Lord, that I was able to relinquish the royal life, so early and so easily. I know that the greatest kings, with inward natures, strive long and pray hard before they achieve the life of an ascetic.

You ask me what boon I want. I seek the very boon that all your true bhaktas, those that abandon their possessions, want, and no other – let me serve your holy feet! After worshipping you, who are the bestower of moksha, who would ask for boons that must, inevitably, bring bondage?

Let me abandon every desire founded in sattva, rajas, and tamas, and seek shelter in you, the sinless one that transcends the gunas, who are without a second, who are the essence of consciousness.

Supreme Spirit, who give sanctuary to your bhaktas, I am a wretched sinner. I am tormented by threefold suffering, besieged by the six relentless enemies – the passions, and have no iota of peace. Yet, I am your devotee, and I seek refuge in you. O true and blissful One, deliver me from the dangers all around!'

Krishna said gently, 'Great King, lord of all the Earth, your mind has found purity and resolve. I offered you any boon you wanted, but you were not tempted. I was not testing you, O King, but showing how a bhakta with true devotion can never be tempted or corrupted by worldly pleasures.

Those that practise meditation and pranayama, even in seclusion, but do not have bhakti – the subtle desires in their hearts remain undestroyed, and they inevitably turn back to pleasure, and the gratification of the senses.

Go anywhere you care to, Muchukunda, with your heart absorbed in me. I bless you that you shall have unshakeable devotion to me, wherever you are, in every circumstance.

When you were a king, you hunted and killed many innocent creatures in the forest. These sins cling to you, and you must burn them with the fire of dhyana. Control your senses, submit to me, and in your next birth you will be born as a great Muni, with universal love for all living things.

In that life, you will find my transcendental Being, which is beyond Prakriti and karma.' "

JARASANDHA AGAIN, AND THE MESSAGE FROM RUKMINI

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "RAJAN, WHEN KRISHNA BLESSED HIM, IKSHVAKU'S son Muchukunda lay at the Blue One's feet in sashtanga namaskara, the prostration of eight limbs. Then he rose and walked out of the cave in which he had slept for so long.

As he went along he saw that trees, plants, animals and men had all diminished in size, and he knew that the kali yuga was near. Northwards went Muchukunda. Austere, his heart brimming with bhakti, his mind and senses restrained, he came to Mount Gandhamadana.

Upon the fragrant mountain, he dwelt in Badarikasrama, of Nara Narayana, and worshipped Vishnu with tapasya. He remained equanimous in every season and circumstance; heat and cold were the same to him.

Krishna returned to Mathura, besieged by the Yavanas, and obliterated the Yavana army. Then he came to Dwaraka, his new city of marvels amidst the waves. With him, he brought all the weapons, armour, and treasures of the army he had just razed. Even as this wealth arrived in oxcarts, Jarasandha came yet again, with another twenty-three aksauhinis.

Rama and Krishna were by themselves, sending off the spoils of the war to Dwaraka. Seeing Jarasandha, they decided to behave as ordinary mortals might – they ran from him! The Magadhan laughed. He could never fathom their divine natures, and he pursued them in his chariot, with a legion of his men.

Running long and fast, upon feet tender as lotuses, the brothers arrived at the Mountain Pravarshana, so named because Indra always inundated it with rain. They climbed the mountain. Jarasandha also arrived at the foot of Pravarshana, but could not find the trail of Krishna and Rama anywhere.

Certain that they were upon the mountain, probably hiding in one of its caves, he had his soldiers gather a large quantity of dry wood, and set the hill ablaze. When the forests of the lower reaches caught and burned, Rama and Krishna leapt down the sheer cliff across from where Jarasandha was. They leapt down a full eleven yojanas, over raging flames, and made their way to Dwaraka. By now, of course, the enemy believed them trapped in the conflagration. Convinced that, finally, he had immolated his two mortal enemies, Jarasandha returned to his capital Girivraja, in Magadha, with his heart on song and his immense army behind him.

At Brahma's instance, Raivata, king of the Anartas, gave his daughter Revati to be Balarama's wife. Krishna, the Lord, married Rukmini, who was an amsa of the Devi Sri, born into the royal house of Vidarbha, as King Bhishmaka's daughter. However, Bhishmaka did not offer his princess to Krishna, rather he snatched her away from under the eyes of a number of kings and warriors, even as Garuda did the chalice of amrita once.

Krishna crushed the Salvas and Sishupala and his allies, among others, in a lightlike and one-sided battle."

Parikshit asked, "Yes, I have heard that Krishna took the exquisite Rukmini in rakshasa vivaha. Divine Muni, tell me how Krishna vanquished the kings of Magadha and Salva, when he abducted Rukmini from her father's city.

Ah, knower of the Parabrahmam, which bhakta can ever tire of listening to the exploits of Krishna, when they are so sanctifying and full of excitement and delight? For sure, they destroy man's ignorance, and are full of novelty regardless of how often one listens to them!"

Sri Suka said, "Bhishmaka, king of Vidarbha, had five sons and a beautiful daughter. His eldest son was Rukmi, whose brothers were

Rukmaratha, Rukmabahu, Rukmakesa, and Rukmamali. Rukmini, the princess, was the youngest.

From visitors to her father's court, Rukmini heard about Krishna – his beauty, his virtue, his prowess – and she fell in love with him, and desired him for her husband. In Dwaraka, Krishna also heard about Rukmini, and how lovely she was, how intelligent, charming, kind, generous, and agreeable. He, also, thought she would make him a good wife.

Most of Rukmini's family agreed that a match for her with Krishna would be an ideal one. However, her brother Rukmi, who was a protégé of Jarasandha, thought of Krishna as his enemy. He promised his sister's hand to Sishupala, king of Chedi. Bhishmaka and Rukmi fixed a date for the wedding.

When Rukmini heard this, she sent a trusted and elderly brahmana to Dwaraka, with a desperate note for Krishna. Arriving in the city in the sea, the brahmana was ushered into Krishna's presence, where the Blue One, who was the Paramatman, sat in his court in a golden throne.

Krishna rose from his throne, embraced the brahmana in welcome, offered him padya and arghya, and then made him sit in his throne, worshipping the illustrious one even as the Devas do Vishnu! Later, when they had eaten, Krishna sat beside the brahmana, pressing the old man's tired feet.

Gently, he asked, 'Holy One, are you dissatisfied with the living that you make? Are you in any difficulty? Are you unable to perform your Vedic rituals? If a brahmana lives in contentment with whatever comes to him, by his holiness, and without effort, by his swadharma, surely his life blesses the entire world.

While, without contentment in his heart even Indra, lord of the Devas, would roam the worlds with neither peace nor rest. But he that owns contentment owns joy. I always honour men that are satisfied with what they get, who live in their own dharma, who are friendly to all the living, without pride, whose minds are peaceful, and abide in me.

I pray that the king of your land is helpful to you in every way. Such a king, who helps his subjects, is dear to me. Tell me, dear friend Brahmana, from which kingdom have you come, taking the trouble to cross our sea? If it is no secret I would be happy to know.

Most of all tell me if there is anything I can do for you.'

When he heard how kind Krishna's tone was, the brahmana delivered the message he brought from Rukmini, without hesitation or reserve.

He said, 'Krishna, Lord, the Princess Rukmini of Vidarbha sends you this message. She says, "I hear about your virtues, O Krishna, and their description pierces my heart, my entire being, with bliss. I hear about how beautiful you are, and I have shamelessly fallen in love with you. My mind, my heart, my body and soul are yours.

Noblest among men, granter of moksha, no princess of noble birth, who is virtuous and restrained, could resist choosing you for her husband – you who are my equal in birth, character, form, education, youth, wealth and splendour.

Pervasive One, I choose you to be my husband, and offer myself to you. I beg you, take me for your wife. Lotus eyed Krishna, don't let Sishupala of Chedi despoil me, who belong to you. For that would be like the jackal stealing the lion's mate.

I pray that if I have earned any punya, worshipping Brahman, with sacrifices, charity, religious rituals and vows, by adoring and serving the Devas, Rishis, my elders and my Gurus – you and none else may be my husband.

Krishna, my father and brother have decided I will marry Sishupala. Come to Vidarbha on that day, my Lord, with your generals. Vanquish the Chedis and the Magadhas, and take me to be yours in rakshasa vivaha. Krishna, let the bride price you pay for me be your valour.

If you worry that you might not be able to abduct me without killing my relatives, I have a solution for that. On the eve of the wedding, we will go in procession to the temple of our Kula Devi, Mother Parvati. The temple is outside the palace, and the bride-to-be will walk with the procession.

If he, the dust from whose feet is sought by all the greatest souls – even Uma's Lord Parameshwara – does not take me away that evening, O Krishna of the lotus eyes, I swear I will fast unto my death. Life after life, I will kill myself, until I make you mine."

This is the Princess Rukmini's message to you, O Krishna. You have not much time left before the day of the wedding, to plan what you will do, and to act swiftly,' said the fine brahmana from Vidarbha."

THE ABDUCTION OF RUKMINI

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "KRISHNA SMILED TO HEAR THE PRINCESS' message. Lovingly, he took the brahmana's hand, and the Bhagavan said, 'Holy one, I do not sleep at nights, because I also am always thinking of Rukmini, even as she is of me. Rukmi is my enemy, and though I asked him humbly for his sister's hand, he chooses to mock me and give her to Sishupala instead.

He shall not have her, Brahmana, for I will take the lovely princess for my own – even like fire is extracted from wood at a yagna.'

Krishna asked when Rukmini was to marry Sishupala, then called his charioteer Daruka, to prepare his chariot immediately. Daruka soon fetched the chariot, harnessed to the Blue One's horses Saibya, Sugriva, Meghapushpa, and Valaahaka. The charioteer stood with folded hands before Krishna.

Taking the brahmana messenger with him, Krishna climbed into the chariot called Jaitra. So fleet were those horses, they covered the distance from Anarta to Vidarbha in a night.

Bishmaka was almost like Rukmi's slave, out of love for his eldest son. From this overweening putrasneha, he had his city decked out for his daughter Rukmini to marry Sishupala, though he knew the princess preferred another.

The highways, streets and city squares were all swept and washed, until they fairly shone. Street-corners flew flags in vivid colours, with fine designs woven into them. Great, carved arches, bright with garlands and other adornments, curved gracefully over important crossroads.

The bouquet of the finest incense wafted out from the grand homes and mansions that flanked the streets of Kundina, the capital of Vidarbha. The people of the city wore their best clothes and jewellery, having first bathed and rubbed themselves with fragrant sandalwood paste. They wore festive garlands of flowers.

The people worshipped the Pitrs and the Devas. They fed the brahmanas of the city, and sought their blessing. The breathtaking Princess Rukmini bathed, put on two fresh pieces of uncut, unsewn silk, and adorned herself with the most priceless jewellery. They tied the symbolic wedding ornament, the kautuka, on her wrist.

The most learned priests chanted mantras from the Rig, Samana, and Yajur Vedas – to protect the bride from every evil, from malignant psychic influences. Other, equally learned masters of the Atharva Veda poured oblations onto sacred fires, also chanting passages from the fourth Veda – to pacify the Navagraha, the planets that rule human lives.

King Bhishmaka, a scholar of the scriptures, gave generous gifts to these holy men – gold, silver, clothes, fine milch cows, and sweets made of sesame seed and jaggery.

Exactly as Bhishmaka did for his daughter, in his capital King Damaghosha of Chedi had his own brahmanas perform sacred rituals to bless his son Sishupala, the bridegroom. When these rituals and sacrifices were completed, Sishupala and his party set out for Rukmini's city. Sishupala went forth with an army, of chariots adorned with golden chains, legions of elephants with ichor flowing down their temples, great complements of cavalry, and other legions of footsoldiers.

Bhishmaka welcomed him formally, and after a grand reception, led Sishupala to a splendid palace, where he and those that had come with him would stay. Here, a company of kshatriya kings, mighty lords of the earth, gathered – Salva, Jarasandha, Dantavakra, Vidhurataha, Paudraka, and others belonging to the arrogant and evil conspiracy that held such sway over the world.

All these kings were sworn enemies of Rama and Krishna; they had fought in every battle against the brothers outside Mathura. Every one of them had come to Kundinapura with an army, in case Krishna and Rama arrived with a Yadava force to try to carry away the Princess Rukmini by force.

In Dwaraka, Balarama heard about these kings taking their armies to Kundina. He knew Krishna meant to abduct Rukmini, and thought it wise to go to the capital of Vidarbha himself, taking a Yadava army with him. He went with elephants, cavalry, and footsoldiers.

Meanwhile, Bhishmaka's daughter was waiting for Krishna to arrive. She sat on the highest floor of a lookout tower in the palace, gazing out beyond the city walls. There was no sign of Krishna, or of the brahmana with whom she had sent her note.

Despondently, she thought, 'Just one night remains before they give me away to Sishupala, and Krishna has not come. Oh, I am such an unfortunate creature. And God knows what happened to that brahmana who carried my note to Dwaraka.'

She sighed in the deepening dusk. 'Perhaps Krishna did set out for Kundina, after all, then realised some grave flaw in me, and turned back. Otherwise, at least the brahmana would have returned by now. Yes, I might as well face the truth – I am an unlucky woman, whom God does not favour.

Lord Siva does not bless me, and neither does the Devi Parvati, his consort, the Mountain's daughter.'

She bit her lip and sobbed, shutting her eyes for a moment, while tears drenched her long black lashes and crept past them, rolling down her fine face. She resolved to be brave, and thought hard of Krishna; after all, the bridegroom's procession had not yet arrived at her palace door. There was still time; there was still some hope.

Suddenly, Rukmini felt her left thigh, that hand and eye throb and twitch sharply – surely, good news was near. A sakhi came to inform her that the brahmana she had sent to Krishna was waiting for her in her apartment. Rukmini ran down the watchtower, along the broad passages and arrived a little breathless in her private chambers.

She saw the brahmana, his face shining, his movements relaxed, and at his ease. A smile broke out on the princess' face. Eagerly she questioned him, and the brahmana told her that Krishna would arrive in Kundinapura to carry her away before she became Sishupala's wife.

Never in her life had she felt such joy. She could not think what gift she should give the brahmana. Overwhelmed, with a small cry, she prostrated at his feet.

When King Bhishmaka heard that Rama and Krishna had arrived in his city, ostensibly to attend his daughter's wedding to Sishupala, he came out with every show of honour and cordiality to receive the brothers. Conches sounded and trumpets, and Bhishmaka made the customary offerings of madhurparka, silks, and other gifts of value. He showed them every respect.

Wisely, or so he thought, he arranged from them to stay at a slight remove from his own palace and the heart of the city, where Jarasandha, Sishupala, and the others were. He gave them a most attractive mansion set in a wooded parkland, where they would be comfortable with their entourage and the legion they brought.

Indeed, Bhishmaka took care to welcome and house his wedding guests according to their age, their closeness to him, their prestige, status, wealth, and power.

When the people of Vidarbha heard Krishna had arrived, they flocked to gaze at him, to drink the beauty of his face like a lotus of a thousand petals.

They saw him and said, 'Surely, only our Rukmini deserves to be the wife of Krishna!'

'Only he, of perfect form and character, deserves to become her husband!'

'If we, the people of Vidarbha, have any punya, let God grant that Krishna takes our princess' hand in marriage.'

'We pray that Sishupala never weds Rukmini, for she was born to become Krishna's queen.'

As they spoke thus among themselves, and continued to gaze enchanted at Krishna, the bride was setting out for the Devi Parvati's temple, ringed by a cohort of palace guards. She went barefoot to worship the Holy Mother's sacred feet. Her mind, however, was absorbed in thoughts of Krishna.

The older women of the palace and Rukmini's sakhis also went with her, as did a throng of musicians, blowing conches, flutes and trumpets, beating heady rhythms on drums of many kinds. Brahmana women, wearing shining new silks and glittering jewellery, anointed with sandalwood paste, bright and fragrant with flowers, went with Rukmini.

Singers of note accompanied the princess, giving mellifluous praise to the Goddess with song. The chanting of her thousand mantric names filled the air.

Arriving at the temple, Rukmini washed her hands and her feet. She did achamana, and performed other purifying rituals with blessed water. Then, calming her heart, she entered the Devi's shrine.

The older brahmana women, who knew every nuance of the rituals prescribed in the Shastras, went in with the princess. They would help her worship the Devi Bhavani, who is not apart from her Lord Parameshwara Siva.

Rukmini prayed, 'Mother, I prostrate before you, and before your sons Ganesha and Karttikeya. Bless me, Devi, that Krishna becomes my husband. I beg you, grant me this boon!'

She made the ritual offerings to the image of the Goddess – first holy water, then a mixture of sandalwood paste and unbroken rice grains, then incense, then silk cloth, garlands, and precious jewels, other gifts and food, and finally the waving of lamps.

She worshipped and gave gifts to brahmana women that were not widows. She made the same offerings to them as to the Devi, as well as salt, various sweet cakes, betel leaves, fruit and sugarcane. The women blessed her, then gave her the now sanctified portions of what she had offered, as prasadam. Rukmini received these, bowing reverently to the women and prostrating before the idol of the Devi.

Now Rukmini broke her mowna, her vow of silence, as she emerged from the temple holding the hand of one of her sakhis. Her hands sparkled with the fabulous gemstones that decked the rings upon all her fingers.

As Rukmini came out of the Devi Parvati's shrine, she looked as bewitching as the Lord's Maya, personified, she that beguiles the universe.

Looking at her, the great kshatriyas there felt their minds unsettled with desire.

She was absolutely beautiful – sixteen, her breasts budding, her waist slim, encircled by a jewelled girdle, her face reflecting the glow of her earrings. Her smile was full of warmth, and her eyes darted here and there, nervously, in the face framed by thick curls. Her teeth were white and fine as jasmine buds, and seemed to be tinged with crimson from the reflection of her lips red as the bimba fruit.

Anklets whispering, she walked as gracefully as a swan gliding upon water. The kshatriyas gathered there looked at her, and could not tear their gazes away; such feelings of love and lust transfixed them. Why, so powerful was the effect she had, with her shy glances and her dazzling smile, she that had actually come to offer herself to Hari – a few of the younger kshatriyas swooned to see her. They fell down in their chariots, or off their horses' and elephants' backs!

Her feet were two slow-moving lotus buds. Now she swept aside her curls that fell across her face, to see if Krishna had come for her. She looked nervously around at the kshatriyas surrounding her. Suddenly, she saw him! Achyuta, the changeless One, flew toward her in his chariot with the banner of the golden eagle.

Before the other warriors could blink, Krishna swept her into the ratha, contemptuously ignoring the press of hostile kings – even as a lion takes his kill from a pack of jackals. He flashed away from the crowd outside the Devi's temple, and, joined by Balarama, the Yadava legion set out for Dwaraka, at their leisurely pace.

Of course, the other haughty kshatriyas, Jarasandha and the rest, could not brook this. 'Fie on us!' cried the Magadhan. 'These cowherds have ruined our honour, the honour of the world's greatest warriors, like a herd of deer might savage a pride of lions!' "

KRISHNA MARRIES RUKMINI

SRI SUKA SAID, "IN A FROTH, THE KSHATRIYAS DONNED MAIL AND TOOK up bows and other weapons. Their armies going with them, they dashed after Krishna in their chariots. Rajan, seeing the tide of warriors sweeping after the Blue God, the Yadava army barred its way.

Sitting on horses, elephants, and in chariots, the trained archers of the hostile kings covered the force from Dwaraka in a torrent of arrows, like thunderclouds pour their rain upon mountains. The lovely Rukmini trembled to see her husband's legions almost hidden by these dark shafts. She looked nervously, bashfully, into his face.

Krishna smiled, and said, 'Don't be anxious, my beauty. Watch, and you will see our army razing the enemy.'

Quickly, in rage, Vrishni heroes like Gada and Balarama began to decimate the legions of Rukmi's allies. They shattered chariots, littered the field with the corpses of horses and elephants. Cut from their necks, countless soldiers' heads rolled on the ground, still wearing earrings, crowns, and bright turbans.

Severed hands, still clutching bows, swords and spears lay upon the ground like hoods of serpents hacked from their bodies. Legs hewn off, feet without legs, horses' heads, those of mules, elephants and camels sprouted in a flurry of gore, like blades of grass.

While Jarasandha and the other kings' armies had been making merry in Kundinapura, the Yadavas had come just for battle. Led by the elemental Balarama, the legion from Dwaraka swept the enemy before it in a wave of blood. All too soon, few warriors remained alive, and these fled, along with Jarasandha and his other kings.

Sishupala of Chedi stood stricken – like a man whose wife had been abducted! The other kings consoled him as best they could.

Jarasandha said to his sishya, 'Do not grieve, for all things must pass. In this world, pain and pleasure are both inconstant for men, each coming and leaving in its season. The jiva dances in the hands of Ishwara, as a wooden puppet does in the hands of the puppet-master.

Seventeen times, I, Jarasandha, took an army of twenty-three aksauhinis to Mathura, and seventeen times Krishna razed my legions. Only the last time, I was victorious and the Yadavas fled to Dwaraka. I waste no time weeping over fate. Joy and sorrow, success and failure are not in our hands, but given to us by time, when God wills.

Today, a small Yadava force has razed our legions – because time favours them today. Only remember that when the wheel of time spins in our favour, we shall triumph as well.'

Comforted by Jarasandha and his other friends, Sishupala returned to Chedi, to his capital. The other kings, who escaped Balarama and the Yadavas, also went back to their kingdoms.

Rukmi, however, could not bear the thought of Krishna marrying his sister by rakshasa vivaha, abduction. Taking an aksauhini with him, he rode after the Blue God. Before he went, he swore a solemn oath for his allies, Jarasandha and the others, to hear.

'I shall not enter Kundina again until I kill Krishna and fetch Rukmini back. I swear this before you all.'

He leapt into his chariot, and cried to his sarathy, 'Ride at the cowherd! I will make an end of his arrogance with my arrows today.'

It seemed Rukmi had little idea of the infinite prowess of the Blue One, or else he forgot in his blind rage. Soon, leaving his army behind, he flashed away alone in his chariot after Krishna, shouting all sorts of puerile challenges and vile abuse.

With all his might, he shot three arrows at Krishna, striking him, and cried, 'Stop and fight me, you blot on the name of the Yadavas! Why do you flee like a coward after stealing my sister as a crow does the offerings from a sacrifice?

Impostor, fool, today I will end all your vanity with my arrows. I tell you, let my sister go before I kill you!'

Krishna allowed Rukmi to pursue him to the banks of the Narmada. Suddenly, he whirled round in his chariot and, in a blur, smashed Rukmi's bow in shards with six arrows, slew his horses with eight, and his charioteer with another two. He cut down the prince of Vidarbha, his brother-in-law's, standard and flagstaff with three shafts.

Rukmi seized up another bow and loosed five furious barbs at Krishna, one of which struck him. Once more, Krishna broke the bow in Rukmi's hands. Rukmi picked up another, and Krishna clove that too.

Having no bows left, Rukmi brandished a range of other weapons – iron clubs, spears, tridents, slim lances and thick rods. All these Krishna shattered with effortless, supernatural archery. Drawing a sword, roaring, Rukmi leapt out of his chariot and rushed at Krishna – as a moth does toward a flame.

Krishna shot Rukmi's sword and his shield to bits. Growling dreadfully, he drew his own blue, glinting blade to put an end to the duel. With a wail, Rukmini fell at her husband's feet.

'Mahayogin, incalculable one!' she sobbed. 'Lord of the Devas, auspicious one, master of worlds! Ah, Mahabaho, mighty-armed, I beg you, you must not kill my brother.'

She trembled, but held his dark feet fast. Her face had shrunk like a withered lotus, her voice quivered in fear, and her golden necklace broke and fell to the ground. Krishna stopped himself; he lowered the sword raised to cut Rukmi's head from his throat.

Yet, he was not going to let Rukmi off easily. He stripped that prince naked and tied him up with his fine clothes. Roaring and laughing, Krishna shaved half the hair on Rukmi's head with his razor-sharp sword, and half his beard and moustaches, too, while the scion of Vidarbha soiled himself in terror.

Meanwhile, Balarama and the Yadavas overtook Rukmi's army, and devastated it, as an elephant in rut does a lotus pond. When the Yadavas reached Krishna they saw Rukmi, bound, shaven, and almost dead from humiliation. They found Krishna laughing in triumph and Rukmini in tears.

Balarama cut Rukmi's bonds, helped him wash in the river, and gave him a fresh set of clothes. The older brother scolded Krishna, 'This does not become you! To disfigure a relative like this is equal to killing him.' Turning to Rukmini, he consoled her, 'My dear, the truth is that men reap as they sow – the fruit of their own karma. Do not think badly of us for what your brother has suffered, perhaps he brought this upon himself.'

Again, he turned to Krishna, and the truth was Balarama was suppressing a smile. Yet he upbraided his brother once more, mainly to mollify Rukmini. 'One must never disfigure a relative like this, whatever he might do. He should only be turned out or away. You already shamed him by abducting Rukmini – that by itself was equal to death for Rukmi. You did not have to kill him again like this.'

He turned back to Rukmini, 'But this terrible dharma has been ordained for kshatriyas by Brahma himself – in battle, a brother must kill even his brother.'

Balarama castigated Krishna once more, 'Only men that have been blinded by the arrogance of wealth and power seek battle with near relatives from desire for land, wealth, women, honour, or to show off their strength.'

Finding Rukmini still in tears, 'It is not intelligent to think that someone, just because he is related to you by blood, must always meet with benevolence and kindness, especially when he is known for his own ill will and contempt. If he does not live by dharma, one day he must pay for what he does.

Only the Lord's maya deludes one to believe that one's kith and kin shall be above the universal law of karma. God is the same in every embodied being; only ignorance and illusion perceive him as being different or many – like the moon in the sky reflected in several pitchers of water.

Ignorance identifies the Atman with the body; then the jiva feels the body's experiences to be his own. This binds him to the wheel of births and deaths, to transmigration. In truth, the Atman has no union or identity other than with itself. The body, the mind, and their experiences have no existence apart from the Atman. They are not real.

The relationship of the Atman to the world of appearances, this samsara, is rather like that of the sun to the eye that perceives it – the sun is not that eye, it has no real identity with the eye.

The Atman is changeless; only the world of time and illusion, the body, changes, and is subject to birth, decay, death, and rebirth – rather like the waxing and waning of the moon, which never in fact changes, but only appears to. The death of the body is like amavasya, when the moon appears to vanish, but does not in truth. So, too, the Atman continues to exist even when the body disappears.

The ignorant jiva experiences the world of samsara as a sleeping man does a dream. So, lovely princess, realise the truth that sorrow also is just an illusion, which deludes us and dims spiritual consciousness. Realising this, be at peace.'

The young Rukmini heard Balarama, and she grew quiet, her agitation left her. Humiliated beyond endurance, his army wiped out, his honour shattered, and just his life spared, Rukmi decided he would keep his oath sworn before Jarasandha and the other kings – he would not go back to his father's capital, Kundinapura.

Rukmi built a new palace for himself, called it Bhojataka, and declared again that until he slew the villain Krishna and rescued his sister, he would not return to Kundina.

Thus, O Parikshit, Krishna crushed all the enemy kings and their legions, abducted Rukmini, and brought her home to Dwaraka. There he married her formally with Vedic rites. The Yadavas thronged the streets and the palace to celebrate the occasion.

Wearing their finest clothes and jewellery, men and women came bringing gifts for the couple. The city in the sea was festive with flags of Indra waving in the ocean breeze, and decked out in bright garlands. Its streets had been swept, washed and sprinkled with ichor from the tuskers of friendly kings. At the gates and doorsteps of every house stood ceremonial and auspicious urns of sacred water, burning lamps, and incense. Plantain stumps and arecanut palms adorned the doors and gateposts.

Men from across the kingdoms of Bharatavarsha, men of some majesty and importance roamed the marvellous streets of Dwaraka – Kurus, Srinjayas, Kekayas, Vidarbhas, and Kuntis. They embraced and walked together, arms linked, and elation upon them.

The story of Krishna's dashing abduction of the young princess was quickly on everyone's lips; soon it was being sung by all the minstrels and bards, too! Transcendent joy owned the hearts of the people of Dwaraka and their guests, on that magical day when Krishna married Rukmini in the city among turquoise waves, and she, of course, was the Devi Sri incarnate."

THE BIRTH OF PRADYUMNA

SRI SUKA SAID, "KAMADEVA, THE GOD OF LOVE, IS ALSO AN AMSA OF Vishnu. He once distracted Rudra from tapasya, and fire from Siva's third eye burnt him to ashes. Wanting a new body, Kama went to Vishnu. So, he was born to Krishna and Rukmini, as their son Pradyumna, who would become a renowned prince and warrior, and hardly inferior to his father.

There was an Asura called Sambara who knew that his death had been foretold at the hands of Krishna's son Pradyumna. The demon could assume any form he chose, and, becoming a palace maid, he kidnapped the infant Pradyumna, when he was barely a few days old, and cast him into the sea.

A large fish swallowed the sinking child, and some fisherfolk snared that fish in their net. Seeing the size of the fine fish the fishermen brought it as a gift for Sambara. The fish went to the kitchen, where Sambara's cooks cut it open and discovered the splendid, golden child inside.

Wonderstruck, they sent for Mayavati, who was in charge of the Asura's kitchens. She, too, stood bemused and amazed to see that child, while uncanny infatuation tugged at her heart. Just then, Narada Muni appeared there, timely as always, and told her who the child was.

More, he told Mayavati that she was Kama's wife, Rati, born into this life to be reunited with her lost love whom Siva had once burnt to ashes. Mayavati adopted the wonderful child, and loved him to distraction. Impatiently, she waited for him to grow up, while Sambara never suspected that he harboured the one born to kill him, in his very palace.

Pradyumna grew swiftly into a radiantly handsome youth, and every woman that laid eyes on him lusted after him – princesses, serving-maids, cooks and Sambara's wives, of every age and hue. Of course, Mayavati desired him most of all.

One day, when she could not bear it anymore, she made advances to him. Taken aback, Pradyumna said, 'Mother! How can you do this after you have raised me all these years?'

She replied, 'You are not my son, Pradyumna. You are the son of Krishna, and you are an amsa of Vishnu. When you were a baby, Sambara stole you from your mother's bed and cast you into the sea. You, my love, are Kama Deva, whom the Lord Siva made ashes, and I am Rati, your wife of old!'

He knew she spoke the truth, for she stood transformed before him, and fathomless memory bloomed in his heart. Mayavati said, 'Sambara is your enemy, and the demon's death has been written at your hands. The only way to kill him is with sorcery, and he is a master of maya.

In Dwaraka, my love, your mother Rukmini still mourns you, like a cow that has lost her calf, or an osprey her chick.'

Mayavati now taught Pradyumna the art and the arcane secrets of mahamaya, the way of the occult warrior; with this, he could dispel the most potent spells that Sambara could cast at him.

Pradyumna came to Sambara's palace, and shouted for the demon king with a torrent of abuse! Hissing like a snake trodden upon, eyes blazing, the Asura came out with a cudgel in his hand. With a roar, he whirled the weapon round and flung it like lightning at Pradyumna.

Pradyumna smashed it aside with his own mace, and ran at Sambara. Quickly, Sambara began to fight with maya, which he had once learnt from Mayaa Danava. He vanished, and from the sky, rained razor-headed arrows down on Krishna's son. Pradyumna resorted to the purest sattvika magic, the mahavidya that rules every other sorcery, every other maya. The arrows fell around him tamely as flowers.

Now the Asura began to cast spells of every sort at Pradyumna – sorceries of the Guhyakas, Gandharvas, Pisachas and Sarpas. Krishna's son repelled them all. Leaping at Sambara, Pradyumna cut off his head with a lightning stroke of his sword, and the grisly thing rolled down the palace steps – coppery hair, fangs, earrings and crown.

The Devas sang Pradyumna's praises from the sky, and poured down a shower of unearthly blooms over him. Now Mayavati, who could fly through the sky, took him in her arms and brought him home to Dwaraka.

They flew down into the magnificent inner apartments of Krishna's antapura, where a hundred exquisite women lived. They flew down like a blue cloud with a streak of lightning clinging to it.

Yes, blue as a thunderhead, wearing brilliant yellow silk, powerful arms hanging down to his knees, handsome beyond describing, his smile dazzling, his eyes slightly red, his curly hair a bluish cascade, the women of the harem mistook Pradyumna for his father, and hid themselves coyly, being half clad, and some of them not wearing a stitch.

Then they saw that the stranger was much younger than Krishna; indeed, he was not Krishna. They saw, in some astonishment and delight, the lovely woman with him, and they emerged curiously to welcome the couple.

Rukmini came there and suddenly found her breasts well with mother's milk! Powerful memories of her lost son surged in her. She thought, 'Who is this wonderfully noble youth? Whose son is this lotus-eyed boy? Who is his mother, and who is she that comes with him, as beautiful as a Goddess? Why, if my son whom I lost when he was a baby were alive, this youth could well be him.'

And of course, then, it struck her, 'How like Krishna he is! The same form and face, the same voice and laughter. My left arm throbs, and I feel such strange love for him – this must be my child!'

Just then, Krishna walked into the room, with Devaki and Vasudeva. He, in fact, had always known about Pradyumna, and who and where he was. He had never told anyone what he knew. Now Rishi Narada arrived in Dwaraka, and in the palace; he began to tell the story of Pradyumna.

The women listened open-mouthed, and then such rejoicing broke out – as when a loved one you believed dead suddenly comes home. Devaki, Vasudeva, Balarama, Krishna, and especially his mother Rukmini clasped Pradyumna and Mayavati in their arms.

Then on, the couple lived in Dwaraka. Pradyumna looked so much like Krishna, and indeed was so much like him, that the women of Krishna's harem found him irresistible. Often, in secret, in dark corners of the palace passages, they would accost him with soft caresses and kisses.

What wonder was there in this, since that magnificent youth was Kamadeva himself – Kama, who unsettled the minds of Siva and Brahma with lust, Kama who is an amsa of Vishnu, in whom the Devi Rema dwells.

It was only natural for royal women in Dwaraka, and others, too, to become wildly infatuated with Pradyumna. Like his father, he was not averse to their intimate attentions either."

THE SYAMANTAKA

SRI SUKA SAID, “ONCE, SATRAJITA DISPARAGED KRISHNA'S GOOD NAME. he sought forgiveness and expiation by offering Krishna both the magical jewel, the Syamantaka, and his daughter Satyabhama.”

Parikshit asked, “Muni, how did Satrajit disparage Krishna?”

Suka said, “Satrajit was a bhakta of Surya Deva, and worshipped him intensely in the heart of a forest. Becoming pleased with his worship, the Sun God gave him the brilliant gemstone known as the Syamantaka, which was a part of the Deva's body.

Satrajit came to Dwaraka wearing the blinding jewel round his neck, and people thought it was the Sun himself come to the Earth. They went and told Krishna that Surya Deva was on his way to visit him, dazzling the Sea City.

‘Lord Narayana,’ they cried, ‘all the Gods of the three worlds seek you out. Now, Surya Deva has discovered that you live hidden among the Yadus, and he has come to see you!’

Krishna smiled. ‘It is not Surya Deva, but only Satrajit, shining with the jewel the Sun has given him.’

Satrajit went into his own home. He called some brahmanas, and with their help installed the jewel of the Sun in the shrine in his house, dedicated to Surya Deva. Parikshit, wherever the Syamantaka is, it yields eight bhaaras of gold. It also keeps away poverty, contagious diseases, serpents, robbers, anxiety, and every other kind of misfortune.

One day, Krishna came to see Satrajit, and asked him to give the

Syamantaka to Ugrasena, king of the Yadavas. Krishna knew the danger of owning the gem with any trace of attachment either to the jewel or to the gold it gave. But Satrajit was becoming so rich, and he was indeed so attached to the gold, that he refused. Calm as ever, Krishna went back to his palace.

Then, another day, Satrajit's brother Prasena went hunting with the Syamantaka, brilliant as a drop of the sun, hung round his neck. A lion ambushed Prasena, killed him and his horse. The lion tore the Syamantaka and its chain from Prasena's body and went off toward its mountain cave.

Jambavan, ancient kings of bears, saw the dazzle of the Syamantaka, killed the lion, and took the jewel to his cave and gave it to his son to play with.

Meanwhile, in Dwaraka, when Prasenajit did not come home, his brother Satrajit became anxious. He told the people of the Sea City that he was sure Krishna had killed Prasenajit for the Syamantaka. Quickly this scandalous gossip flew across the city, and it appeared that most believed what Satrajit said, since he had become a wealthy and important personage by now.

Finally, news of the rumour reached Krishna and he decided that he must clear his name. Taking a group of prominent Yadavas with him, he went out of Dwaraka and followed the trail of Prasenajit's horse. Soon, they found the hapless Yadava with his throat torn out by the lion. They followed the lion's pugmarks and found it upon the mountain slope with its neck broken like a twig, and the huge footmarks of Jambavan leading away from that carcass.

Following these footprints, they arrived at the cave of Jambavan. It was pitch dark inside. Telling the others to wait outside, Krishna walked into the darkness. In a corner of the magnificent cavern, he saw Jambavan's little son playing with the sparkling Syamantaka. He approached the child to take the jewel from him.

Seeing a strange dark man come toward them, the boy's nursemaid gave a scream. Jambavan came tearing out of an inner cave and, roaring dreadfully, flew at Krishna. They fought like two hawks over a shred of meat – using sticks and stone, weapons, and mostly fists hard as adamant.

For twenty-eight days, the duel raged in the labyrinth of caves deep in the mountain. Finally, bruised by Krishna's blows, his arms dislocated, exhausted and beaten, Jambavan said in a voice full of astonishment, 'You are none but He that animates all beings, and are the strength of their senses, their hearts and bodies. You are the Pervador, the one who controls Prakriti. You are the lord of all things, of limitless prowess. You are the Creator of Brahma; you are the final reality, the substance of the universe.

You are the soul of time, the final power that absorbs all things into yourself. You are the soul of the souls of all creatures. You are the God of the Gods, the Paramatman. Ah, you are he that made the ocean boil with a look from your eye, and yield to you so you could build a bridge and pass over him into Lanka. You are he that consumed Lanka in the fire of your astras, and slew a thousand great rakshasas with your lightlike arrows. You are my Rama, none else, you are my Lord Rama!'

Two yugas ago, Chiranjivi Jambavan had fought against the ten-headed Ravana at the side of Vishnu's Avatara of that greater time – the perfect and noble Rama of Ayodhya. Now, Krishna said to him, 'I came here to clear my name, for in Dwaraka they say that I killed Prasenajit and stole the Syamantaka, which your son has.'

His heart full of untold love, for he saw his precious Rama in the form of blue Krishna, Jambavan not only returned the Syamantaka, but gave his exquisite, changeling daughter, Jambavati, to be Krishna's wife.

The Yadavas who had come with Krishna waited outside the cave for twelve days. At first, they heard the sounds of the stupendous battle from within, but gradually the noise receded into the heart of the mountain. In some fear, the Vrishnis waited, but there was no sign of Krishna. Then sadly, believing Krishna to have been killed by whatever awesome creature he had encountered in the cave, they turned home for Dwaraka.

Devaki beat her breast and wailed; Rukmini sobbed ceaselessly; Vasudeva and everyone else in the palace and the Sea City mourned. Dwaraka was like a body from which the soul had flown.

At the black heart of despair, they cursed Satrajit for what had happened. Finally, they turned in prayer to Durga, the Mother of utmost mystery, and begged her to return their Krishna to them. No sooner had they worshipped the Devi, than, as if by a miracle, Krishna appeared in Dwaraka, bringing his new wife Jambavati with him, and the Syamantaka dazzling round his neck!

Seeing him was like being reborn, or rising from the dead. Krishna sent for Satrajit, and gave him the Syamantaka, telling him how it had been recovered. His head bowed in shame, Satrajit received the jewel wordlessly, and went home with it.

Full of remorse, Satrajit pondered how he could make some amends for the crime he had committed by casting aspersions on Krishna's reputation. Of course, the people of Dwaraka had turned against him, as well, and were abusing him roundly everywhere, some even asking for his head. Satrajit decided wisely to give Krishna both the Syamantaka and his lovely daughter Satyabhama.

Krishna married Satyabhama by Vedic rites. She was as virtuous, generous, and noble as she was beautiful. More than a few suitors had approached Satrajit for his daughter's hand, among them Akrura, lord of gifts.

After the wedding Krishna said to Satrajit, 'I will not take the Syamantaka from you, for I am no devotee of Surya Deva as you are. Yet, since Satyabhama is your only child, you can bring us the gold from the jewel. And one day, we might inherit the gem, as well, after your time.' "

THE LATER STORY OF THE SYAMANTAKA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "AROUND THIS TIME, THE KAURAVA PRINCE Duryodhana persuaded his father, the blind king Dhritarashtra, to send Kunti and the Pandavas to Kasi. There, he built a palace of lac for them, and had one of his trusted men set it on fire. Word came back to Hastinapura that Kunti and her sons had perished in this fire.

Krishna knew his aunt and cousins had escaped, but he went anyway, with Balarama and some important Yadavas, to attend the funeral rites in the city of elephants. The Vrishnis mourned beside Bheeshma, Vidura, Kripa, Gandhari, and others. While Krishna was away, Akrura and Kritavarman hatched a plot to take the Syamantaka from Satrajit.

They enlisted the help of the Yadava Satadhanva, saying to him, 'Satrajit promised you his daughter's hand; why he betrothed her to you. Now he has broken his word, and given her to Krishna instead. Why shouldn't he go the way Prasenajit did?'

They poisoned his mind, stoked his greed, and Satadhanva murdered Satrajit in his sleep. Even as the women of Satrajit's household screamed, Satadhanva slaughtered him like a butcher does an animal, took the Syamantaka from Surya Deva's shrine, and made off with it.

When Satyabhama saw her father's bloody corpse, she fainted. Waking, wailing, she repeatedly called out to him, 'Father, O my father, why have you left me?'

She had the body embalmed in a tub of oil, and rode straight to Hastinapura. She fell into Krishna's arms, sobbing, and told him what had happened. Rama and Krishna wept, saying, 'Disaster has struck us, we must return at once to Dwaraka.'

Krishna rode into Dwaraka, and declared that he meant to kill Satadhanva and retrieve the Syamantaka. Satadhanva was terrified when he heard this, and went to seek Kritavarman, the Bhoja's, help. But now, Kritavarman said, 'I cannot do anything to displease Balarama and Krishna. They are Gods upon the earth.

To offend them is to court death. Look at the fate of Kamsa. The mighty Jarasandha brought seventeen armies against them, and each time went home on foot, alone, after Rama and Krishna annihilated his legions.'

Satadhanva went to Akrura, but met with a similar response. 'I would be a fool to make enemies of Rama and Krishna. Krishna creates, protects, and destroys the universe. Bound in his maya, not Brahma can fathom his ways or mysteries.

When he was a boy of seven, he uprooted a mountain and held it aloft for seven days, easily, in one hand: as another child might a mushroom! Ah, I bow to Krishna, the worshipful one of great deeds – the original Being, the changeless Spirit.'

Forsaken by the two that had instigated him, Satadhanva left the Syamantaka with Akrura, mounted the swiftest, strongest horse he could find, and fled Dwaraka. Balarama and Krishna followed him in their chariot that flew the banner of Garuda, yoked to Krishna's four magical steeds.

Arriving on the outskirts of Mithila, Satadhanva's horse fell dead under him. Leaping up, he ran for all he was worth. Krishna sprang down from his ratha and pursued him. Then, he summoned the Sudarshana Chakra and struck Satadhanva's head off with it. Krishna searched the headless corpse for the Syamantaka, but did not find the jewel.

Coming back to Balarama, waiting in the chariot, Krishna said, 'I killed him for nothing; he does not have the jewel. He must have given it to someone. Let us go back and find out who that is.'

But Balarama said, 'Having come so far, I would like to visit my old friend, the king of Mithila.'

So, Krishna returned alone to Dwaraka. Videha, the king of Mithila, welcomed Balarama like his own brother and insisted that he stay with him for some weeks. It was now that Dhritarashtra's son, Duryodhana, took lessons at the mace from the big Yadava, who was an unrivalled master of that noble weapon.

In Dwaraka, Krishna told Satyabhama that her father's death was avenged but the Syamantaka was still missing. Krishna had the funeral rites performed for Satrajit. Meanwhile, when they heard about the slaying of Sudhanva, Kritavarman and Akrura fled Dwaraka, Akrura taking the Syamantaka with him.

When Akrura left the Sea City, Dwaraka and her people were afflicted by all sorts of sicknesses. Macabre and supernatural occurrences stalked the city, tremors shook her, tidal waves lashed her walls, and uncanny drought dried her pools and reservoirs, so there was no fresh water to drink.

The people began to say that Akrura leaving Dwaraka was the worst misfortune that could have overtaken them. Krishna was forgotten, as if he was powerless to either cause or stop the spate of ill luck. They forgot the old adage that as long as a holy one dwells in any place, his presence will keep misfortune away.

Krishna called the elders of his city, and asked them what the misfortunes meant. The elders in Dwaraka recalled an old story about Akrura's father Svaphalka. They said, 'Once there was a terrible drought in Kasi, and no rain fell for a long time. Akrura's father happened to pass through Kasi at that time, and the king gave his daughter Gandini in marriage to him. The very same day, the sky filled with clouds, a heavy rain fell, and there was an end to the drought.

Svaphalka's son, Akrura, has inherited his father's powers. Where he lives, the rains will be timely and plentiful, and no natural disasters or diseases will come near that place. Look what has happened to Dwaraka after Akrura left.'

Hearing this, Krishna sent a messenger to Akrura and called him back to Dwaraka, assuring him that he would be safe. Krishna knew it was not Akrura's absence but that of the Syamantaka which caused the diseases, the earthquakes, the appearance of the ghosts and ghouls, the storms and the drought.

When Akrura returned, Krishna received him with honour into his palace. For a while, they sat exchanging pleasantries, then Krishna said, 'My lord, I know that Satadhanva gave you the Syamantaka. Satrajit died without leaving a son, and his daughter Satyabhama's sons should inherit all his possessions, so they can continue to make their offerings to the manes.

However, the Syamantaka is too dangerous for an ordinary man to own or wear. For he that does so with even a trace of attachment, for the gem or its gold, meets a swift and violent death. Only someone spiritually evolved, as you are, and above greed, as you are, O Akrura, may safely keep the jewel of the Sun.

To share a secret with you, my brother Balarama believes that I have the jewel; he suspects me. I beg you, O master of gifts, show all our relatives the Syamantaka, and let them know I did not take it. Surely, you cannot deny having the gem, since these days you perform your yagnas upon golden altars.'

Akrura took out the square of cloth in which the Syamantaka lay, and put the blinding jewel in Krishna's palm. Krishna held it up for all to see, absolving himself of blame. Rajan, he that listens to the story of the Syamantaka, which in truth is about the power and glory of the Lord Vishnu, the pervasive One, shall have all his sins made ashes. He will be rid of disrepute, and its very cause; and shall find peace."

THE WIVES OF KRISHNA

Sri Suka continued, "When the Pandavas reappeared after escaping Duryodhana's fire in Kasi, Krishna went to their new capital, Indraprastha. With him, went Satyaki and other notable Yadavas.

When Kunti's sons saw the Lord of all things and the bestower of moksha, those magnificent kshatriyas rose in reverence and excitement, animated even as the indriyas are in the presence of the Mukhyaprana!

The Pandavas embraced Krishna, burning up all their sins by that touch; they gazed at his smiling face, so full of love, and in deep joy, gazed on. Krishna prostrated before Yudhishtira and Bheema, who were older than him, embraced Arjuna, born on the same day as himself, while Nakula and Sahadeva prostrated at his feet.

Krishna was shown to the highest seat in the court of Indraprastha. The Pandavas had just recently married the peerless dark Panchali, and she approached Krishna shyly, and paid obeisance. The Pandavas and Panchali now honoured Satyaki, and conducted him to another lofty seat in the sabha.

All the others who had come with Krishna were welcomed ceremonially and affectionately, and seated with respect.

Later, Krishna went to meet Kunti in her apartment. He rose to greet her, touching her feet, and she embraced him, her nephew, like another son. She felt overwhelmed with affection, and wept. Panchali, her new daughter-in-law, was with her, and the Pandavas' mother asked after her brother, Vasudeva, Krishna's father.

Suddenly, she broke down and sobbed, remembering the trials that she and her sons had been subjected to by Duryodhana and his brothers. She said to Krishna, who removes the sorrows of all jivas by granting them the knowledge of the Atman, 'Krishna, how secure and happy we felt when you sent my cousin Akrura to meet us.

Truly, you are he that protects the universe, and you have no friends or enemies. Yet, you dwell in the hearts of those that think of you constantly, and you remove their pain.'

Now Yudhishtira said feelingly, 'I do not understand by what punya of ours, you, whom the greatest Yogis hardly see, have come to us like this.'

At Yudhishtira's fervent entreaty, Krishna spent the four months of the monsoon in Indraprastha with his loving cousins. The people of that city were blessed indeed, for they feasted their eyes on the sight of the Avatara of God.

In Indraprastha, Krishna and Arjuna grew as close as brothers, as Avatara and bhakta, as eternal friends rediscovering a bond from another ancient life – when they were Narayana and Nara.

One day, they went hunting together in the thick jungles that surrounded the city. They went in Arjuna's chariot, which flew the banner of Hanuman, Arjuna wearing mail and carrying his bow, the Gandiva, as well as his twin inexhaustible quivers given to him by Varuna Deva.

Countless animals he killed, with incomparable archery – porcupine, hare, deer, boar, bison, gavaya, tiger, even rhinoceros and an eight-legged and fearsome sarabha. Through carriers, Arjuna sent Yudhishtira all the game his brother needed for his yagna on the next amavasya, the day of the new moon.

Tired and thirsty after the hunt, Arjuna and Krishna came to the banks of the Yamuna, to wash their faces and drink her sweet, midnight-blue water. After ritually purifying themselves with achamana and some mantras, they drank long and deep. Then they rested on the river's lush bank.

Suddenly, they saw a beautiful woman walking beside the Yamuna. She was dazzling, and, when she favoured them with it, shyly, her smile was brilliant.

Lying on emerald grass, propped on an elbow, Arjuna asked, 'Lovely woman, who are you? Whose daughter are you? How have you come to this jungle, and what do you seek here?' He smiled, 'I think, perhaps, you are in search of a husband! Come, tell me about yourself.'

Kalindi, for that was her name, answered him, 'I am Surya Deva's daughter. I am seeking a husband, but I have sworn that I will marry only Mahavishnu, for he is the greatest of all male beings and a sanctuary to his bhaktas. I live a life of tapasya to achieve what I desire.

Kshtariya, I will have none but Narayana for my husband. I pray that he, the friend of the friendless, granter of mukti, will be gracious to me. I live under the river in a house my father built for me. I will live there until Krishna, who is the Lord Vishnu himself, comes to make me his wife.'

Arjuna brought her to Krishna, who, knowing everything already, promptly took her hand in Gandharva vivaha, pulled her up into their chariot and brought her to Dharmaputra Yudhishtira in Indraprastha, for his blessing.

Some months earlier, Indraprastha – or Khandavaprastha as it had been once known – was an arid wilderness that their uncle Dhritarashtra gave his nephews as their patrimony. It was a city in ruins, in the heart of a desert. The Pandavas asked Krishna to help them build a city, from where they could begin to rule their desolate half of the Kuru kingdom that their blind uncle had foisted upon them.

Krishna summoned the divine artisan Viswakarman to accomplish that task. Overnight, using unearthly power, Viswakarman created a magnificent city in the heart of the desert which had come to exist because of an ancient curse. The prophecy was that when a Kuru king wished with all his heart to restore the ancient capital of that Royal House, the curse would end and Khandavaprastha be restored to its former glory.

They named the new city after Indra, for he had lent his divine support to its construction, and the wasteland around the city had bloomed, also overnight, into lush, dense jungle, teeming with wildlife and game of every kind.

Another day, Krishna and Arjuna went into the jungle called Khandava, and helped Agni, the Fire God, burn it down, with all its fell creatures, rakshasas, pisachas and the like. Many times, Agni had tried to consume the Khandava vana, but each time Indra had thwarted him, sending down torrents of rain that doused Agni's fiercest flames. Indra did this for the sake of his friend Takshasa, the serpent king, who lived in the heart of the Khandavaprastha.

Now, Krishna and Arjuna asked for a chariot and weapons with which they could help the Fire God accomplish his blazing desire. Agni summoned Varuna Deva, who gave Arjuna an unearthly chariot drawn by white horses, the mighty bow Gandiva, which had once belonged to Brahma himself, and two quivers that welled with arrows, inexhaustibly.

Krishna took the reins of the chariots, Arjuna wielded the Gandiva, and Agni raged through the evil vana, licking it up with towering flames. When Indra sent down his lashing thundershowers, Arjuna the Pandava created a dome of arrows in the air, preventing the rain from putting out Agni's flames.

Every creature in that forest perished – every vile bird, beast, spirit and plant. A fastness of evil upon the Earth was exorcised. Takshaka, the serpent king, was not in the forest when Agni razed it, but his son Aswasena escaped the conflagration, while his mother sacrificed herself so that her son could live.

Another being escaped Agni's flashfire by seeking Arjuna's protection – Mayaa Danava, genius, the awesome architect and artisan of the Asuras. In gratitude for saving his life, Mayaa, who once created the fabled Tripura in the sky, now wrought an unparalleled sabha for the Pandavas in Indraprastha. He blended the three styles of architecture in an unprecedented fashion – those of the Devas, the Asuras, and of men – and truly it was a peerless sabha.

Among many other wonders, Mayaa created a subtle illusion inside the court he made for Yudhishtira and his brothers. Anyone who came into the sabha with envy or hatred in their hearts would give themselves away.

Portions of the solid floor of the sabha seemed like pools of water, while other parts, which appeared to be solid, were in fact water.

The clean-hearted would also be momentarily deceived by this artifice of the master artificer, but upon approaching near, they would see water for water and floor for floor. However, after Yudhishtira's Rajasuya yagna, his cousin Duryodhana was seen first treading gingerly over solid floor and then he plunged into a clever pool, while all the Pandavas – except Yudhishtira – and, especially, the ravishing Panchali, burst out laughing. Even the servants in the sabha laughed, and Duryodhana never forgot that humiliation.

When the Mayaa sabha was complete, Krishna returned to Dwaraka, with Satyaki and the other Vrishni with whom he had come. In the Sea City, he solemnised his Gandharva vivaha to Kalindi.

Meanwhile, another princess yearned to become Krishna's wife – Mitravinda of Avanti. But her brothers Vinda and Anuvinda were friends of Duryodhana, and they forbade her to choose him for her groom at her swayamvara. Mitravinda was Krishna's cousin, her mother Rajadhidevi being Vasudeva's sister. Again, Krishna carried her away under the noses of all the kings who had come to the swayamvara.

Nagnajit was the pious king of Kosala. His daughter was a handsome princess, Satya, also called Nagnajiti after her father. Her father had laid down a condition – that no suitor would have his daughter's hand, unless he tamed seven dreadful bulls the king owned. These beasts were massive, with great sharp horns, ill-tempered in the extreme, and grew furious if they smelt a stranger near them.

Krishna heard this and arrived in Kosala with an army. Nagnajit welcomed him warmly, with honour, worship, and many fine gifts. Krishna accepted his hospitality graciously. Satya heard the Avatara had come to win her hand, and prayed, 'For so long, I have meditated upon him with bhakti and I have kept many vratas. Yet, he must decide himself to bless me.

He is the Lord; Brahma, Rudra and the Devi wear the dust from his feet upon their heads. From age to age, he incarnates himself in the world to protect dharma. Oh, I pray he becomes my husband!'

When Krishna was comfortably seated in the court of Nagnajit, that king asked him, 'Narayana, Lord of worlds, what can an insignificant mortal like me do for you?'

Smiling, his voice sonorous as a rumbling cloud, Krishna replied, 'Rajan, the Rishis have said that, by his dharma, a kshatriya should never beg. Yet, today I ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage. But we will not pay a bride price for her.'

Nagnajit said, 'Who can be a better groom for my child than you, in whom every virtue abides, in whom the Devi Sri dwells eternally? Yet, O Lord of the Sattvatas, I have taken a vow that only he that passes a trial of strength can have my Satya for his wife.

Her suitors must tame seven wild bulls that I own. I must warn you, Lord, that these beasts have gored and trampled many mighty kshatriyas to pulp. Krishna, if you can tame the bulls, you shall certainly have Nagnajiti for your wife.

And then no one can point a finger at me, saying that I broke my word that only he who tames the bulls will marry my princess.'

Krishna said, 'Bring the bulls out into your arena.'

There, girding his loins, he created seven Krishnas, each as powerful as the others, and quite casually subdued the frothing bulls. With a few thunderous blows he brought them bellowing to their knees, and bound them securely with ropes. Then, laughing all the while, he dragged all seven hilly brutes around the arena, playfully, as a child does his wooden toys.

In great joy, Nagnajit gave his daughter to be Krishna's wife, and the Blue God took her hand by solemn Vedic rites. With pomp and ceremony, the king of Kosala and his delighted wives celebrated the marriage of their princess.

Auspicious conches resounded deeply; pipes, drums, kettledrums played, while the best singers lent their voices to the occasion, and the greatest brahmanas in the kingdom intoned loud blessings for the couple.

The people of Kosala turned out in their finery, in joy. Nagnajit gave ten thousand cows, three thousand sakhis, all richly clad and bejewelled, for Satya's dowry. He gave an army of nine thousand elephants, a hundred times as many chariots, and as many footsoldiers.

Finally, that loving king helped Krishna and his newly won bride into a gilded chariot and saw them off with tears in his eyes.

Meanwhile, some kings, whom the Yadavas had crushed in battle in the past, and had also narrowly escaped being killed by the seven bulls of Kosala, heard Krishna had won Satya's hand, and that he was on his way back to Dwaraka with her. Combining forces, they attacked the Yadu army.

Arjuna had come to Kosala, and he slew and scattered the marauding kings and their legions with arrows from the Gandiva – like a lion does a jackal pack. Devaki's son, the Lord, master of the Yadavas, returned to the Sea City with Satya, and all the wealth her father had given to be her dowry.

Krishna's father had another sister called Srutakirti. Krishna also married her daughter, his cousin Bhadra, princess of the Kekaya kingdom. She was offered him by her brothers Santardana and four others.

Then, like Garuda snatched up the chalice of amrita, Krishna abducted the daughter of the king of the Madras, the exquisite princess Lakshmanaa, whisking her away from her swayamvara. Indeed, he had many more wives, as well – more than sixteen thousand beautiful women, whom he released from the harem and dungeons of Narakasura, son of Bhumi Devi, after he slew that Demon."

THE SLAYING OF NARAKA

RAJA PARIKSHIT ASKED, "TELL ME HOW KRISHNA KILLED THE DREADFUL Narakasura, who was Bhumi's son, and how he released those women. Tell me about the prowess of the wielder of the Saringa."

Sri Suka said, "Once, Indra came to Dwaraka, and complained about the Asura Naraka. The Demon had forcibly taken Indra's royal parasol, his mother Aditi's priceless and sacred earrings, and usurped Indra's throne upon golden Mount Meru.

Krishna summoned Garuda, and taking Satyabhama with him – for he had just married her – he flew to Narakasura's capital Pragjyotishapura. All sorts of fortifications protected that city, physical and magical ones, too. There were mountain barriers, weapons that attacked anyone who flew toward the dark city – weapons of water, fire and wind.

Inside the city, Murasura's occult fortifications guarded Pragjyotishapura. Krishna smashed the mountains that appeared in the sky with the Kaumodaki, his mace; he scattered the elemental weapons that flashed, flared, and whistled at him with his Sudarshana Chakra.

Arriving over Pragjyotishapura, he blew a terrible blast on the Panchajanya, shattering the enemy soldiers' nerve with that sound, which was like the cosmic thunder that heralds the Pralaya, when time ends. It also brought down the snares of Mura, who lay asleep submerged in the moat around the city.

Mura opened all the eyes on his five heads. He jumped up to see Krishna and Garuda in the sky. This Demon was bright as a small sun, or the fire of the apocalypse, so one could hardly bear to look at him. A trident blazing in his hand, hissing and roaring from five mouths, yawned as if to swallow the worlds, he rushed at the Golden Eagle and the Avatara on his back. Like a five-hooded serpent came that Demon.

He whirled his trisula round and cast it at Garuda like a thunderbolt. Then, he flung his heads back and gave vent to a horrible battery of howls that echoed through the Earth, the Sky, all its quarters, even reverberating through the Cosmic Shell.

Krishna trisected the flaring trident with two lightlike arrows from his Saringa. In a blur, he sealed the five baying mouths with transcendent archery. Mura flung a sorcerous mace at Krishna, who smashed it to dust in the space of a thought.

Growling deep in his throat, Mura ran at Garuda with his immense arms raised, talons extended, but Krishna cut his heads from their throat with the Sudarshana Chakra. Spouting blood from his naked neck, Murasura fell into the clear water of the moat, like a mountain of old whose wings Indra had sheared with his Vajra.

Outraged, grief-stricken at their father's almost casual slaying, Mura's seven sons issued from the gates of Pragjyotishapura like some dread disease, to avenge the death. Pitha, the eldest, led them; Tamra, Antariskha, Sravana, Vibhasu, Vasu, Nabhaswan, and Aruna followed him – all armed to the teeth, and exhorted by Naraka.

They attacked with feral cries and every maner of weapon – lances, clubs, tridents, arrows, swords, axes. Krishna blew all these into dust with his supernatural archery. In less time than it takes me to tell you, Pitha and his brothers died, their bodies shredded by Krishna's Chakra and his arrows.

Naraka watched the slaughter through his lofty window, and his eyes burned crimson, his breath flamed. The son of Bhumi Devi came to battle mounted upon an elephant sired by the sea-born Airavata, that flew through the air; he came with a complement of other such elephants and demon warriors riding them.

He saw Krishna and Satyabhama gliding serenely through the sky upon Garuda's back, like a thundercloud bearing lightning riding the sun. Naraka cast a satagni at them, a spear of a hundred calific fires. At the same moment, his Asuras all loosed their missiles at the Blue God.

In moments, Krishna decapitated a thousand monstrous demons; he slew sky-ranging elephant, horse and footsoldier that had come out of the black crystal city. His arrows were deadly rain, every one plumed with feathers of many colours.

Garuda fell upon the flying elephants, too, striking them with vast and powerful wings, dissecting them with talons like scimitars, pecking their white and grey heads off with his beak. The elephants could not face the terror of the Golden Eagle; they turned tail and fled back into the city of sorcery.

Naraka stood firm while his army fled. He cast his lance at Garuda now – the weapon that had resisted even Indra's Vajra. Garuda was as unruffled as a mountain struck by a garland of flowers! Roaring, Narakasura seized up a black trident to attack Krishna, but the Blue One cut off his head with his Chakra.

The head of the Demon, the son of the Earth, lay upon his mother and it was bright; its crown and earrings sparkled, the blood flowing from it shone. Naraka's family and his people lamented, but in the sky above, the Rishis and the Devas rejoiced. They sang and shouted their glee, and flung showers of unworldly blossoms down on the victorious Avatara.

Now, the slain Asura's mother, Bhumi Devi, came to Krishna. She brought Mother Aditi's golden earrings, studded with invaluable gemstones, past all compare. She brought a garland with five kinds of undying wildflowers, Varuna's royal parasol, and a secret and marvellous jewel, shaped like Mount Mandara, full of splendour and power.

Her palms joined, Mother Earth began to hymn Krishna:

'Namaste Devadevesha Shankhachakragadadhara; Bhaktechchottarupaya Paramatman Namostute;

Namah Pankajanabhayah Namah Pankajamaline; Namah Panakajanetraya Namaste Pankajanghraye…

I salute you, O God of Gods, who bear the conch, the disk, and the mace; obeisance, O Supreme Consciousness, who assume many forms to satisfy the wishes of your devotees. Salutations, O lotus-naveled, salutations O lotus-garlanded; I salute you, O lotus-eyed, I bow to you with the lotus feet!

I salute Vasudeva, who is the foundation of all things. I salute Vishnu, who is the Indweller in all things. I salute Him who is the source of everything, who is omniscient, who manifests himself as every cause and effect.

I worship you, who are eternal, who are the Supreme Spirit, infinitely powerful, the greatest Being. I worship you, the Father of worlds, the Unborn, Lord of worlds, omnipotent One.

You are he that assumes the awesome power of rajas to create the universe, tamas to destroy it, and sattva to nurture and protect it. None comes in your way, for you are the Purusha who transcends Prakriti and Kaala.

The five elements – earth, which I am, water, fire, air and sky – their five objects, the Gods that preside over them, Ahamkara, Mahatattva, and Buddhi – all these evolutes of which all things living and inanimate are made – are mere phenomena in you, Lord without a second!

O You who save your bhaktas from fear, this is my grandson Bhagadatta. He is Naraka's son, and comes to you with great trepidation, to seek refuge at your lotus feet. Be gracious to him, Lord; become his sanctuary; lay your hand, which burns every sin to ashes, upon his head.'

Krishna did as Bhumi Devi asked, blessing Bhagadatta; then he entered Pragjyotishapura, elegant, prosperous, affluent city. There, in Narakasura's harem, he found more than sixteen thousand delectable young women, whom the Demon had taken for himself – some as the spoils of war after vanquishing their fathers or husbands in battle; others were the daughters of Rishis that had captured his fancy, or just women he saw and desired.

Now, those sixteen thousand saw Krishna and, quick as light, fell in love with him. Each said in her mind, 'I give my heart, my soul to him; let him become my husband! Let Brahma grant this one absolute wish of mine.'

Knowing what they wanted, knowing they had nowhere else to turn, Krishna had them clothed in finery, adorned with the finest ornaments in Naraka's treasury, and sent home to Dwaraka in golden palanquins. He also took great treasure, which the Demon had plundered over yugas, and countless horses and chariots.

Krishna also took sixty four-tusked elephants, all perfectly white, of the lineage of Airavata.

Mounting Airavata again, he flew up to Amravati in Devaloka, Indra's realm, where he restored Mother Aditi's earrings to her. Indra and Sachi received Krishna and Satyabhama with great show of affection and honour. When Satyabhama saw the Parijata, tree of wishes churned up from the Kshirasagara, she told Krishna that she wanted it for herself.

Indra and his Devas refused to give the Avatara that precious tree. Krishna uprooted it, crushed the Devas in a swift and one-sided battle, and flew back to Dwaraka bringing the Parijata with him. The magical, lustrous tree was planted in Satyabhama's garden, and the honeybees of Devaloka flew down to the Earth, for they could not live without its fragrance and the nectar of its flowers.

Krishna said to Satyabhama, 'Just days ago, Indra came begging to me, laying his crowned head at my feet, when he wanted me to kill Narakasura. Yet, once he had what he wanted, he shows his gratitude by attacking me. This is why Indra and his Devas are not worthy of worship. They are blind with prosperity, foolish with wealth.'

As for the sixteen thousand beauties he brought home from Pragjyotishapura, Krishna married them all on the same day. He gave each of them a palace, and he lived with every one of them, assuming a different body for each. He made love to them all, for they were all amsas of the Devi Lakshmi.

Yet, though he was a husband to more than sixteen thousand wives, Krishna always remained yoked in his eternal Atman, and in Brahmic bliss. As for the women, they had Him, whom Brahma and the other Gods can hardly approach, for their husband. They lived in a condition of permanent ecstasy.

Each woman had a hundred sakhis, yet every one of those sixteen thousand always served Krishna herself – cooking for him, washing his feet, bathing him, pressing his feet, making betel-leaf rolls for him, fanning him, rubbing his body with sandalwood paste, scented oils, and other unguents, combing his locks, draping fresh wildflower garlands round him every day, chatting with him, joking with him, flirting with him, and, of course, making sweet love to him as often as they could.

They were as his slaves in love, and their joy was perfect, it was complete."

KRISHNA TESTS RUKMINI

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONE SULTRY NIGHT, KRISHNA, FATHER AND GURU OF the worlds, sat propped on pillows white and soft as milk foam, on Rukmini's bed, while her sakhis fanned him. They served the one who creates, nurtures and withdraws the universe in divine play.

He had incarnated himself as dark Krishna to uphold dharma, which was decaying in the world – the codes of righteousness that he himself had laid down.

Strings of pearls hung from the canopy of that fine bed. Bright lamps, encrusted with rare gemstones lit Rukmini's bedchamber. Honeybees flew in through the wide windows, drawn by the scent of the mallika garlands hung in profusion everywhere in that room. The moon also peered in through those windows. The sound of waves that Soma swelled, which dashed against the smooth walls of the Sea City, also wafted in.

The heavenly fragrance of the flowers of the Parijata tree blew in, as well, borne on a caressing ocean breeze. Incense burning in the vedis of Dwaraka curled in through Rukmini's windows.

Rukmini took the jewelled chowrie-fan from her maid, and began to fan Krishna herself. She was stunningly beautiful, as she stood beside him, lighting up the room. When she shifted lightly from foot to foot, her anklets chimed.

Great jewels sparkled on the rings she wore on her fine fingers, as did the bracelets she wore on her long, slender arms. She had powdered her breasts like lotus buds with saffron dust, and this tinted the pearl necklaces she wore crimson. The golden girdle round her reed-slim waist was priceless, its every gem worth a king's ransom.

Krishna's first wife, Rukmini, was loveliness embodied, the epitome of beauty. Krishna gazed at her, who was Sri Lakshmi incarnate, who was his ideally suited consort, for her form, her tresses, her peerless face, her clothes and ornaments, her smile sweet as amrita.

He stared at her, in some delight, and suddenly a twinkle lit his black eyes and a mischievous smile his lips.

Krishna sighed a little, and said, 'Princess, how many kings, rich as the Lokapalas who rule the four quarters, highborn, generous, noble-minded, handsome, valiant, came asking for your hand in marriage. Madly in love with you, and encouraged by your father and your brother's offer to give you to him, my cousin Sishupala came to your father's capital.

However, you spurned all these exceptional and admirable suitors, and chose to marry me, who am their inferior in every way – in wealth, power, and pedigree. I chose to seek shelter in the midst of the sea for fear of my enemies – who are the most powerful kings on Earth.

Besides, I am no king, and have set aside any claims to become one, ever. You could have been a great queen to some mighty sovereign of the world, and instead you chose to marry me. Why, lovely one?

Have you never heard that trials and tribulations is the assured lot of women who choose husbands whose lives are plunged in mystery, men whose ways do not conform to those accepted by the world.

Rajakumari, I have no possessions, and have never wanted any. And I also seek out those that have no possessions; they are dearer to me than the rich and the mighty. So, indeed, pretty one, the powerful seldom seek my friendship or favour.

You know what the wise say – that one should only marry one's equal in wealth, beauty, pedigree, and ambition. Never should two people whose backgrounds are very different marry.

But you were young when you decided to marry me. You did not know the truth about my antecedents. You were naïve, Princess, and did not know how worthless I am. You were led astray listening to some wandering Rishis, themselves men of little consequence, who praised me – hollow praises, and vain.

But it is not too late. I think that, with your beauty and nobility, you can still find some really worthy kshatriya king who will gladly marry you, and you can fulfil your ambitions in this world and your aspirations for the next.

My lovely Rukmini, Sishupala, Shalva, Jarasandha, Dantavakra, and all their friends and allies – the master spirits of our times – are all my enemies. Perhaps, my worst enemy is your brother Rukmi. It is my dharma to crush the arrogant, and I took you from the midst of these evil ones just to shatter their hubris.

I am a philosopher, my Rukmini, and quite indifferent to women, wealth, and even to my children. I am always content with the joy within, the infinite peace of the Atman. Men like me are mere witnesses in this world – like the light of the sun inside a house, while the star himself is far away.'

Parikshit, Rajan, Krishna said all this to quell that haughty, beautiful princess' pride, for she did feel that he was passionately fond of her, and attached to her, as well. Having said this much, he fell quiet.

Rukmini broke into a sweat; her delicate body began to tremble to hear what her husband, her love, the master of the universe said, laconically, unexpectedly, and so savagely.

She fell silent, her head bent down, and traced invisible lines on the floor with her fine feet, their nails painted red. Tears streamed down her face, kajal-stained, and drenched her soft breasts powdered with saffron dust. She tried to speak, to cry out her grief, but no word or sound would come.

The world spun round, and the fan in her hand fell on the floor, as did the bangles round her wrists. Terror overwhelmed her, and she fainted and fell like a plantain tree in a gale, her long hair coming undone.

Krishna saw how absolute and innocent her love was, that his crafty words had actually felled her. Pity rose in him. He lifted her up, brushed her hair away from her teary face, and tenderly wiped those tears with his sacred hands. Gently, he stroked her cheeks, kissed her eyes, her lips.

Her eyes fluttered open, and a happy smile dawned on her face. Krishna said to Rukmini, 'Ah, princess of Vidarbha, don't be sad. I was only teasing you, my love. I wanted to see your lips quiver a little, and annoyance knit your brow. I wanted to see anger flash in your lovely eyes. But you are too soft.

Ah Rukmini, don't you know that these momentary quarrels are the sweetest times of love?'

She was pacified, and twined her arms round his neck and kissed him deeply. Then, turning her gaze away, but looking at him out of the tail of her eye, she said, 'My Lord of the lotus eyes, what you said about us not being equals is true. For you are the ubiquitous One, the master of all, omnipotent, omniscient, the Lord of the Trimurti, always absorbed in the bliss of the Brahman.

I am merely Prakriti, O Krishna – just the three material gunas – whom only the ignorant could love. Yes, it is true that you have sought refuge in the midst of the ocean. Does Pure Spirit not dwell in the deepest sanctuary of the heart, where the gunas of Nature cannot come, or touch you?

Certainly, it is true that you have many powerful enemies, for you are the jiva, always at war with the overweening senses. As for abjuring kingship, even your bhaktas stay away from sovereign power as they might from the darkest hell.

You said that you are mysterious, and danger would always stalk those that cast their lot with you. Why, the ways of every Rishi who worships you is mysterious, and men that are like beasts, with no bhakti or dhyana, cannot begin to even conceive of them.

Lord, when your followers are never predictable, but always strange by the norms of the world, how can you not be more extraordinary than they are?

You said that you are a nishkinchana, a pauper who own nothing, and only others that are poor love and follow you. Perhaps this is true, for everything that exists is part of you; nothing is outside you that you might possess it. Yet, even Brahma and the other Gods, masters of the universe, whose boons and blessings all men seek, adore you – the pauper, who owns nothing!

Thus, only the deluded and the sensual, those ensnared by the temptations of wealth, and its pride, fools that do not see death coming for them, nearer day by day, do not seek you. The true nishkinchinas, like Brahma, know that everything they appear to own is in fact only yours. These bhaktas, the great paupers, worship you, the greatest pauper!

Your Atman, replete with bliss, embodies these eternal verities. Chaste men, seekers after immortal ecstasy, which you are, abandon this world and all that it has to offer, to gain the final prize. Truly, they are the ones best suited to enter into a relationship, communion with you.

That is the only true marriage, Krishna, never those between two imperfect creatures, a man and woman moved by lust, both of whom inherit a life of sorrow and joy. My Lord, I am your bhakta, and I come to serve you, who are the Soul of bliss. I do not come to you to satisfy any carnal desire, so how can you say that ours is not a marriage between compatible souls?

As for what you said about my falling in love with you after hearing your praises sung by wandering ascetics – that much is true. But not that their praise was hollow or vain, for they were the worthiest of men, who had renounced their all for you, men of universal love, and they said that you are the Atman and that you give your soul to your bhaktas.

So I did choose to marry you, and not Brahma or Indra, why speak of anyone less, whose power and wealth, of which you speak, time consigns so quickly to oblivion – at the twitch of your brow.

Ah, my love, who are Balarama's brother, who are the Lord of all things, you terrified the kings outside the Devi's temple by pulling on your bowstring. You took me for yourself – even as a lion growls to chase away the jackal pack, and takes the prey that is his. How can you say that you hide in Dwaraka from those same kings?'

She warmed to her theme. 'Krishna what could be more absurd than to think that we women who follow you, mad with love, will come to a sad end? Lord of the lotus eyes, has anyone who ever followed you come to grief? Have the Rajarishis come to grief that gave up vast empires and went away into the forest to seek you? Did Vena's son Prithu come to a sad end, or Bharata, Yayati, Anga, Gaya, and all, ali the others?

I think not, Krishna!

You said to me that I should still marry some higher-born, richer, more powerful kshatriya. Yet, what woman with even a grain of sense would choose a husband for herself, who must live always in the shadow of death, rather than remain with you, who are eternal, the abode of all that is good, great and free?

Which woman who has known the fragrance of your feet, of which the Munis all sing, which remove the sorrows of men, in which the Devi Lakshmi lives, could ever dream of leaving you for another man?

I have sought sanctuary in you, Lord of the world, Soul of everything, who makes everyone's dreams come true, in this life and the next. I think only of you as being worthy of attaining.

I, too, am spinning upon the wheel of time, this samsara of births and deaths. I seek salvation at your sacred feet. May your feet dispel my delusion that my spirit is my body, and may they deliver me from every peril.

You told me to seek out some other kings, like Sishupala. My answer to you, O Achyuta, is this – may they find wives that have never heard of your glory, which is hymned even in the sabhas of Brahma and Siva! For those kings' only claim to majesty is that they are content to live in the homes of their wives, like their pets – asses, oxen, dogs, cats – or as their slaves!

Ah Krishna, only women who have never known the fragrance of your lotus feet will pursue husbands that are no more than walking corpses, mere amalgams of flesh, bones, blood, worms, faeces, phlegm and humours, wrapped in a coat of skin, nails and hair.

You also said that you are indifferent to everything, including me, and that you have no interest in women. Lotus-eyed One, even if you are always absorbed in your Atman, your natural inner bliss, even if you have no special interest in me, I beg you grant me just one thing – eternal devotion to your holy feet!

For then, when you awaken from your slumber of Kalpas, and are in a mood to create the universe again, you shall look at me, your Prakriti, with great rajas burning in your eyes. That shall be my great and infinite blessing.

Madhusudana, there is certainly some significance in what you said to me, about seeking another husband. Though Bheeshma swept her away from her swayamvara, Amba, the virgin princess, had already given her heart to another.

Then, there are the loose women who, though married, will always seek out other men, endlessly. No wise man will marry a whore like that, for he will lose both this world and the next.'

Krishna said tenderly, 'Lovely one, my princess, I only teased you to see how you would retort. Everything you say is true. You heart is noble, and it seems you want to exorcise every other desire from it, leaving just one – your love for me. You have always been my bhaktaa, fervent and true.

You have proven yourself, Rukmini, your devotion and your steadfastness. Your love is unshakeable, and you will have every blessing you ever want from me. Yet, remember, my love, my blessings lead inexorably to freedom from desire.

I am he that gives moksha to those that adore me. There are those that worship me with tapasya and vratas to have conjugal happiness, sensual pleasure. These are deluded, ensnared by my maya.

I can bestow both moksha and earthly boons. Unfortunate are they that find my grace and ask only for the latter – for wealth, and mundane enjoyments. For these pleasures can be had even in the hells, or by animals. Why, they can be had so easily.

Queen of my home, you, however, have never wanted anything other than me. Never once have you asked me for any material thing. Your heart is pure, because no one with an evil mind can serve me as you do – with service itself as your only desire. Most of all, no woman that is carnally inclined, or unscrupulous, can ever be as you are, precious Rukmini.

Noble one, I cannot think of another home that will have a wife as loving as you. How many crowned kings came to your father's city to seek your hand in marriage. You were promised to Sishupala by your father and your brother. Yet, I was all that you thought of and wanted.

You rejected all the rest, the most powerful lords of the Earth, and having only heard about me from itinerant Rishis, sent your brahmana messenger to me, telling me about your love, asking me to take you for myself.

I humiliated and disfigured your brother Rukmi on the day I abducted you. Later, Balarama killed him during the game of dice after Aniruddha's wedding. Never once did you complain about what happened – you did not want to displease me; you were afraid of losing my love.

Rukmini, you have conquered me with your bhakti. I well remember the message you sent through the brahmana, all those years ago. You said you would kill yourself if I did not come for you, because in your heart you had already given yourself to me, body and soul.

I have nothing to give you in return for such devotion, for your bhakti is too great, lofty and perfect for me to reward. It must be its own compensation. Nothing I give you, and nothing that I do can adequately bless such love.' "

Suka Deva said, "Saying this, Krishna took Rukmini in his arms and began to caress her. He, the sovereign of the universe, the Jagadishwara, the Soul of the cosmos, forever absorbed in his Atman, made love to Rukmini, who was the Devi Lakshmi.

So, also, Krishna lived as a grihasta in the homes of his other wives, more than sixteen thousand, and all those women lived in supreme harmony and joy with him."

THE KILLING OF RUKMI

SRI SUKA SAID, "EACH OF KRISHNA'S WIVES, O KING, GAVE BIRTH TO TEN sons, every one as splendid as Krishna himself, each one as valiant, handsome, and intelligent. All his wives saw that their dark and magnificent husband never left their homes, and each one thought that he lived just with her, and that she was his favourite.

None of them realised that he was the Brahman, absorbed in his inner bliss, and that none of them ever drew him out of that eternal absorption. All of them, sixteen thousand and more, were forever fascinated by his face like a great lotus, his long-armed, elegant form, indescribable eyes, dazzling smiles, his eloquent gaze and his enchanting talk.

Yet, though they were entirely charmed by him, they could never conquer his heart, and, essentially, he remained detached, despite their every wile and amorous device.

From their arched eyebrows those sixteen thousand loosed Kama Deva's subtle shafts of love at him, constantly. They made these more potent by whispered and silent mantras. Yet, though they held him in their arms, though they wrapped him in their legs, never did they capture his mind or his spirit.

However, having Lakshmi's lord for their husband and lover, the women experienced each day with Krishna as an eternity of love, every dawn and dusk as if they were the first in their lives – rapturously. He, whom Brahma and the other Devas can hardly approach, was always with the women. He smiled at them, spoke to them lovingly, and made unimaginable love to them.

The women's delight grew, and grew. Countless sakhis waited upon those sixteen thousand in their separate palaces, but every woman insisted on serving her deep blue Krishna herself.

Each one would receive him at her door, make him sit, offer him padya and arghya, give him betel leaves to chew, fan him with her chowrie, bathe him, rub sandalwood paste into his dark skin, adorn him with vanamalas, make his bed, comb his long hair, and shower every other intimate attention upon him."

Pausing for a moment, Suka continued, "Let me tell you the names of the ten sons Krishna sired on his eight main wives.

Rukmini's sons, as brilliant as their father, were Pradyumna, Charudeshna, Sudeshna, Charudeha the heroic, Sucharu, Charugupta, Bhadracharu, Charuchandra, Vicharu, and Charu.

Satyabhama's ten sons were Bhanu, Subhanu, Svarbhanu, Prabhanu, Bhanuman, Chandrabhanu, Brihadbhanu, Atibhanu, Sribhanu and Pratibhanu.

Samba, Sumitra, Purujit, Satajit, Sahasrajit, Vijaya, Chitraketu, Vasuman, Dravida and Kratu were Jambavati's ten sons, loved by their father.

Satya's princes were called Vira, Chandra, Asvasena, Chitragu, Vegavan, Vrisha, Aama, Shanku, Vasu and Kunti, the graceful.

Kalindi's boys, grandsons of Surya Deva, were Sruta, Kavi, Vrisha, Vira, Subahu, Bhadra, Shanti, Darsha, Purnamasa, and Somaka.

Lakshmanaa had ten sons also -- Praghosha, Gathravan, Simha, Bala, Prabala, Oordhvaga, Mahashakti, Saha, Oja, and Aparajita.

Mitravinda's sons by Krishna were Vrika, Harsha, Anila, Gridhra, Vardhana, Annada, Mahasa, Paavana, Vahni and Kshudhi.

Sangramajit, Brihatsena, Soora, Praharana, Arijit, Jaya, Subhadra, Vaama, Ayu, and Satyaka were the sons of Bhadra.

Krishna also had a wife called Rohini, and he gave her Diptiman, Tamra, Tapta, and other sons.

Pradyumna married his uncle Rukmi's daughter Rukmavati, in Bhojataka. This couple had the mighty Aniruddha for their son. Countless, indeed, were Krishna's grandsons, for you must not forget that his wives were sixteen thousand, one hundred and eight."

Raja Parikshit asked, "But Muni, Rukmi was Krishna's sworn enemy, always waiting for an opportunity to kill him. How did he give his daughter Rukmavati to be Pradyumna's wife? You are a Yogi, holy one, and you see the past, the present, and the future with the vision of the trikalagyani mystic. Nothing is hidden from you, not what is far beyond the scope of the dim senses."

Sri Suka replied, "Pradyumna, as you know, was Ananga – Kamadeva incarnated as Krishna's son. He crushed a host of rival kshatriyas at her swayamvara and carried his cousin Rukmavati away forcibly, rather as his father had Rukmini.

The princess' father did indeed hate Krishna with a passion – for shaming him when Krishna carried Rukmini away. Equally, though, he loved his sister Rukmini, who was Pradyumna's mother, and wanted to please her. Thus, Rukmi agreed to the marriage between his daughter and his nephew.

O King, Kritavarman, the Bhoja's, son Bali married Rukmini's daughter Charumati. Yes, Rukmi detested no one as much as he did Krishna; still, he gave his granddaughter Rochana to become Krishna's grandson Aniruddha's bride. Aniruddha was also Rukmi's grandnephew, and this was a forbidden union.

However, Krishna, Rukmini, Balarama, Samba, Pradyumna, and many others went to Rukmi's city, Bhojataka, for the wedding of Aniruddha and Rochana.

When the rituals and ceremonies were over, Dantavakra, the king of Kalinga, and some others, all enemies of Krishna and Rama, encouraged Rukmi to challenge Balarama to a game of dice, which they would make sure that he lost.

'Rukmi,' they said, 'Balarama is the most terrible dice-player on earth. But he is addicted to game and will never refuse to play.'

Though they had come together to celebrate an auspicious event, Rukmi allowed himself to be persuaded and he asked Balarama to play dice. Rama accepted, and they sat down to it.

They began with modest enough stakes – first a hundred, then a thousand, then ten thousand panas, gold coins. Rukmi won every game. Wine flowed, and the other kings filled Balarama's glass again and again. When he lost the first few games, the Kalinga king laughed in the great Yadava's face, showing the crooked, entwined teeth for which he was called Dantavakra.

Balarama fumed silently, and now emptied his wine glass as quickly as it was filled. His face was red at the taunts of Kalinga and the others, and Rukmi smoothly raised the stake to a hundred thousand gold coins. Balarama won, but Rukmi swept the dice off the table even as they settled after the roll, and cried, 'I have won!'

The other kings echoed his lie. Balarama's magnificent face was swollen with wine and rage, rather like the sea on a full moon night. His eyes turned red, and he wagered a hundred million panas.

Again, Balarama won, and yet again Rukmi swept the dice off the board, crying, 'Won! I have won.'

Balarama said in a dangerous tone, 'You lost, Rukmi.'

Rukmi turned to his friends, Kalinga and the other kings, and asked them to decide. They lied again, saying, 'Rukmi has won ten crore gold panas!'

Suddenly, an asariri spoke from the air, a disembodied voice that said, 'Balarama played honestly and he won honestly. Rukmi is a liar and a cheat.'

But Rukmi would not accept what the divine voice said. He mocked Balarama, who was Anantasesha himself. 'You and your brother are cowherds, gypsies that belong in forests. What would you know about games of kings like dice? What would you know about archery or any sport of the kshatriyas?'

The other kings laughed viciously, and Dantavakra, the Kalinga king, brought his face near Balarama's once more, baring his twisted teeth in a hideous grin. At that moment, Balarama lost control of himself.

In a flash, he seized his mace and felled Rukmi with a blow that smashed his skull and spattered the rest of the kings and the walls with blood and brains. Then, roaring so the others fled, he was at them.

He caught Kalinga on the steps and knocked his crooked teeth out on the marble, one by one. The rest, too, he did not spare – swinging wildly at them with his gada, breaking arms and legs, fracturing skulls. Somehow, because he was so drunk, they managed to escape with their lives, trailing blood.

Roused by the din, Krishna and Rukmini arrived there. Seeing her brother sprawled dead across the dice board, Rukmini became hysterical.* She turned on Balarama, screaming, 'Is this why you saved my brother's life on the banks of the Narmada? So you could kill him yourself?'

She turned to Krishna, seeking support, but he would say nothing one way or the other – not a word did he say on Balarama's part, and neither for the dead Rukmi.

All Krishna would say was, 'It is time we went home to Dwaraka.'

And so they did. They sat Aniruddha and Rochana in a golden chariot, decked with pearls and flowers, and set out for Dwaraka. Having achieved a subtle purpose of fate, Krishna, Balarama, and the Yadavas came home to the fabulous Sea City. In time, Rukmini forgot her shock and anger, and settled back into her joyful life with her husband, the Blue Avatara."

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* This does seem to contradict the earlier reference to the incident (*See* Krishna Tests Rukmini).

ANIRUDDHA AND USHA

PARIKSHIT SAID, "KRISHNA'S GRANDSON, THE MAGNIFICENT ANIRUDDHA, also married Bana's daughter. I have heard that there was a fierce quarrel between Hari and Siva about this. Mahayogin, I beg you, tell me all about it."

Sri Suka said, "The incomparable Mahabali offered Vishnu, who came as the luminous Vamana, the Earth. Bana was one of Bali's hundred sons. He was a Sivabhakta, noble, generous, intelligent and honest.

Bana lived in his marvellous capital, Sonitapura, and ruled his kingdom with wisdom as his sceptre. Since he enjoyed Siva's patronage, even the elemental Devas were like his servants.

When Siva danced his Tandava, Banasura had pleased the Lord by playing on a thousand percussion intruments, of every known kind, with his thousand hands. Siva, who is always exceptionally munificent to his bhaktas, granted Bana any boon he wanted.

Bana, the Demon, asked that Siva should become his dwarapalaka – his palace guard! One day, as he sat near Siva, Bana, drunk with power, stupid with it, laid his crowned head at the Lord's feet and said, 'Mahadeva, Jagadguru, Lord of all things. I prostrate myself at your feet.

You are the One that satisfies the unfulfilled desires of men. Lord, the thousand arms you gave me have become a mere burden. For, O Siva, except for you, there is no one in creation who is a worthy adversary for me.

Ah, when my hands itched for a good fight, so that I could not bear their fever, I smashed down mountains, powdering them. I chased the Diggajas, the elephants that support the four quarters, but they fled in fear.'

Boastfully, Bana spoke, and Siva became annoyed. His eyes flashed, and the Lord of Uma said to Bana, 'Fool, when you hear the crack of your flagstaff breaking, you will know the battle is near that will put an end to your arrogance.'

Bana, who was indeed a fool by now, was delighted to hear of his impending doom! He went back into his royal apartment, and waited anxiously for the omen, which the Lord of the mountains had said would portend the end of the Asura's power.

Bana had a daughter called Usha. She had never seen Krishna's grandson Aniruddha, why, she had never even heard of him. Yet, she had fallen in love with him! She had dreamt of Aniruddha and decided that he was the husband for her, no one else would do.

When she woke from that lifelike dream, she found he was not with her. Sitting up, among her sakhis, she cried in the most heart-rending way, 'O my love, where in this world are you?'

Kumbhanda was one of Bana's ministers, and his daughter was Chitralekha. She was one of Usha's sakhis and dearest friends. Worried at the strange mood that gripped her princess, she asked, 'To whom are you calling out? What unnatural obsession has possessed you?'

Usha replied, 'I saw someone in my dream. His skin was dark blue, and his eyes were as long as the petals of a lotus. He wears yellow robes, and his arms are mighty and strong. Ah, any woman would give him her heart, as I have.

It is him that I called out to, for he kissed me in my sleep. He made me drink deeply of the honey of his lips, then he vanished. Where is he? I cannot live without him!'

The loyal Chitralekha promised softly, 'If he exists anywhere in the three worlds, I will bring this man to you. But tell me who he is.'

Chitralekha, the brilliant artist, drew pictures of a host of great ones – Devas, Gandharvas, Siddhas, Charanas, Pannagas, Daityas, Vidyadharas, Yakshas, and mortal men. Among the mortal she conjured the forms and faces of Vrishni heroes like Sura, Vasudeva, Balarama, Krishna, and Pradyumna.

When Usha saw her friend's sketch of Pradyumna, a touch of colour rose into her cheeks. Then Chitralekha drew Aniruddha. Usha gave a small cry, hung her head in shyness, and whispered, 'That is him.'

Chitralekha knew Aniruddha was Krishna's grandson. She was an exceptionally gifted woman, blessed with yogic siddhis. Using her occult power, she flew through the sky to Dwaraka by night. She found Aniruddha asleep in his bed. Casting a spell over him so he would not awaken, she picked him up and flew back to Usha in Sonitapura.

Usha was overjoyed to see Aniruddha; he was even more attractive and magnificent than he had been in her dream. He awoke in her private apartment, where no man could come.

She lavished every attention upon him – bathing him, clothing him in the richest robes, anointing his skin with sandalwood paste, adoring him with incense, lamps, rare food and drink, and the most refined, exquisite conversation.

Of course, Aniruddha could not resist Usha and they became fervid lovers. Absorbed in the lovely Usha, Aniruddha did not know where he was, or if it was day or night. And he did not care but was entirely fulfilled in Usha's company and her love.

Thus, the months passed in constant sweet delirium, and Usha noticed that she was pregnant. Her belly began to bloat.

The guards of her private apartments went to Bana and said, 'Majesty, your daughter is pregnant and will bring shame upon your clan. Yet we have never left the entrance to the princess' apartment unguarded for a moment. No man, certainly, has passed us unnoticed. We are perplexed how Princess Usha has lost her virginity and is with child.'

Bana stormed into Usha's apartment and was astonished to see the brilliant Yadava prince who sat there, playing dice with his love, the Asura's daughter. Bana saw how handsome the youth was – the son of Pradyumna, who was Kama Deva incarnate. He saw Aniruddha's deep blue complexion, his long arms, his fulvid robes, his large, lotus-like eyes, his smile, thick locks of hair, and his glittering earrings.

Aniruddha wore a fresh garland of white jasmine around his wide chest, and the flowers were stained crimson with the saffron dust that Usha wore on her breasts. Aniruddha looked up and saw Bana, his arms raised, and his guards behind him. Calmly, Krishna's grandson rose, and picked up his mace. He stood facing Usha's father, and he was like an Antaka, an angel of death, standing ready for a kill.

Bana's soldiers tried to surround Aniruddha, but he struck at them like lightning, even as the dominant male of a sounder of wild boar does a pack of dogs. In a scarlet blur, he smashed arms, legs and chests; he shattered heads, and quick as thinking Bana's guards fled that chamber.

With a growl like muted thunder, his eyes blazing, Banasura, the son of Mahabali, bound Krishna's grandson with a nagapaasa, a serpentine noose of sorcery. Seeing her lover trussed, helpless in the coils of the paasa, and her father looming ominously over him, Usha gave a wail and began to sob piteously."

THE RESCUE OF ANIRUDDHA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "AFTER CHITRALEKHA ABDUCTED HIM FOR USHA, the Yadavas waited for Aniruddha for four months. They did not know where he had gone or how until, one day, Narada came to Dwaraka and told them what had happened to him.

The Vrishnis set out for Sonitapura. Balarama and Krishna took twelve aksauhinis with them, for they knew how formidable Mahabali's son Banasura was. Among these legions were dauntless kshatriyas -- Pradyumna, Satyaki, Gada, Samba, Sarana, Nanda, Upananda, Bhadra, and others as valiant.

They attacked Sonitapura without warning, and devastated its outer precincts – rampaging through carefully tended gardens, smashing down lofty gates, ramparts and watchtowers. Bana saw all this, mustered an army of equal numbers and strength and came red-eyed and roaring to repulse the invaders.

With Banasura came the holy Lord Rudra, mounted on his Bull Nandin, his sons Ganesha and Karttikeya beside him, and his dread host of ganas, bhutas, and pramathas. The most awesome duels broke out – ferocious, marvellous and unprecedented.

Krishna faced Siva in battle, while Pradyumna fought the Lord Karttikeya. Balarama battled with Kumbhanda and Kupakarna. Samba duelled with Bana's son, while Bana fought the gifted Satyaki.

Brahma, the Rishis of heaven, Siddhas, Charanas, Gandharvas, Apsaras and Yakshas filled the sky with their subtle vimanas to watch the fabulous encounter.

Krishna scattered Siva's bhutasanghas, and his pramathas, Guhyakas, dakinis, yatudhanas, vetalas, vinayakas, pretas, maatris, pisachas, kushmandas, and brahmarakshasas with some luminous archery with his longbow, the Saringa.

Siva took up his bow, the Pinaka, and loosed a storm of arrows and astras of every kind at Krishna. The Blue One shot all these down serenely – brahmastra with brahmastra, vayavyastra with parvatastra, agneyastra with varunastra, and the ultimate paasupatastra with a narayanastra.

Then Krishna shot a jrambhanastra at the bull-mounted Siva – a weapon that made Rudra yawn, then fall asleep. Now no one resisted him, and Krishna razed the enemy army as he pleased, with his sword, his bow and his mace.

Pradyumna quickly had the better of the redoubtable Karttikeya. Sorely wounded and bleeding in all his limbs, Subrahmanya fled the field on his peacock. Balarama made short work of Kumbhanda and Kupakarna, sloughing their heads off with his ploughshare weapon, the mysterious halayudha.

Finding themselves leaderless, Banasura's soldiers ran from the battle. Seeing his forces melt before the Yadava onslaught, Bana turned away from his duel against Satyaki and rode at Krishna in his chariot.

The Demon held five hundred bows in his hands, fixed two arrows to each one and aimed them all at Krishna. In a flash, outside the common flow of time, Krishna, master of the six great occult powers, shattered all five hundred bows, Bana's chariot, and slew his horses and sarathy.

Throwing back his head, Krishna raised the Panchajanya to his lips and blew a blast on it like the thunder of the Pralaya. Now Bana's mother-goddess Kotara ran out, completely naked and her hair wild and loose, and stood between Krishna and her son.

Krishna would not gaze upon the naked goddess and turned his face away. In that moment, Bana leapt out of his ruined chariot and fled back into his palace.

When Siva's bhutasangha, his legions of ghouls and goblins ran away from Krishna, another macabre being attacked him – Saivajvara, or Siva's Fever. It had three legs, three heads, and it came flaming, as if it would burn down the ten directions.

Krishna summoned the Vaisnavajvara, which is an icy Fever, and the two fought. Vishnu's Fever was relentless and the Saivajvara was helpless before its mortal and cosmic cold. It tried to flee the battle, screaming, but the Vaishnavajvara pursued it wherever it went, until, finally, Siva's Fever ran to Krishna and fell at his feet, seeking his protection!

It wailed in terror, and began to hymn the Blue God.

'Namami Tvanantashaktim Paresham Sarvatmanan Kevalam Gyaptimaatram;

Viswotpathisthaanasamrohdhahetu yattad Brahma Brahmalingam Prashaantam...

I prostrate before you, who are the omnipotent Brahman, who are the essence of pure consciousness, the taintless one, the Soul of all, the Lord of all the great Gods.

You cause the creation, existence, and destruction of the universe. You are the one of whom the Vedantas speak – the Ultimate One, beyond change.

Time and fate, karma, the jiva that feels pleasure and pain, svabhava, the subtle elements, the body, Prakriti from which the material universe evolves, Prana or Sutra, the vital breath with its five functions, Ahamkara the ego, the five gross elements and the eleven organs of knowledge and of action, the linga sarira or spirit body, which is a product of all these, the potency of the seed to transmit qualities to the child – all these are part of your maya.

I seek shelter in you, Lord, in whom maya perishes!

Playfully assuming many incarnations, you protect the Devas, the Rishis and all men that walk the path of their swadharma. To save them from peril you kill those who live by evil and violence, and by oppressing the good. Now you have come again to lighten the burden of the Earth.

Lord, your savagely cold Jvara will consume me if you do not grant me shelter at your sacred feet. For how true it is that all beings that do not seek refuge in you only suffer.'

Krishna said to the trembling Jvara, 'Trisira, three-headed, I am pleased with you. I free you from the terror of my Jvara. Yet, whoever recalls our meeting must never feel fear of you.'

The Saivajvara prostrated again at Krishna's feet, and went away consoled. The cold Vaishnava Fever no longer assailed it, but now Bana emerged again from his palace, riding in a fresh chariot, and attacked Krishna once more.

With myriad weapons in his thousand hands, Banasura shot a furious volley of arrows at the master of the Sudarshana Chakra. Krishna loosed the Chakra, a wheel of light, at the Demon. Sharper than razors, the Chakra lopped off Bana's arms, ten a moment, like branches from a tree.

As the Asura lost arms and hands in a flurry of scarlet, Lord Siva, always so merciful to his bhaktas, approached Krishna and said to him, 'You are the Brahman, the light of consciousness, Self-effulgent, the secret truth of all Vedic revelation.

The pure of heart see you infinite and immaculate, even like akasa. The sky is your navel, the fire is your face, water your semen, the heavens your head, and the quarters your ears.

The earth is your feet, the moon your mind, the sun your eye, Rudra your ego, the ocean your belly, and Indra your arms. Green plants are your hair, the clouds your locks, Brahma is your intellect, Prajapati your genitals, and Dharma is your heart.

This is what you are, and all the worlds and galaxies are your limbs. You are he whose majesty never wanes. You have come in this Avatara to protect dharma and to rescue the Earth from evil. At your behest, and guided by you, the Devas rule the seven realms.

You are the Original Being, without a second. You, O Self-illumined, are beyond the three states of consciousness; you are turiya, the fourth and final condition. You are the cause of all things, yourself without a cause. Yet, you enjoy the senses, experience everything, for you dwell in every being projected into creation by your maya.

Even while covered by clouds, which are his creation, the Sun reveals those clouds and all below them. So too, O Self-radiant, though the cloud of Ahamkara, created by your Prakriti, obscures you from the jiva, you illumine Ahmakara, the gunas, and the jiva, too.

Deluded by your maya, jivas become intensely attached to their children, wives, houses and wealth. Helplessly, they are tossed up and down the waves of the sea of samsara.

The jiva born as a man by your grace, after thousands of births, who fails to seek your sacred feet, to serve you, but lives a life of indulging his senses – that man is a traitor to himself. He is pitiable.

You are the Soul of every soul, the nearest, most precious one, the Lord, and the Master. The man that abandons you for the sake of sensual pleasures, which lead him away from his own spirit, is the fool that chooses poison over the amrita of immortality.

Brahma, the Devas and Rishis all came to grace by surrendering to you, the dearest one. You are the Spirit within, the final Sovereign, the friend, the infinitely peaceful, the one that confers mukti from the lives and deaths of transmigration. You create, preserve and destroy the worlds, and all of us seek sanctuary in you.

Lord, this Banasura is my servant and bhakta, and he is dear to me. I have granted him refuge. I beg you, bless him also, Narayana, even as you did the Asura Prahlada.'

Krishna said, 'Holiest, most worshipful One, I will do whatever you ask. Whatever you decide, I accept, Lord. Also, this son of Bali, Banasura, belongs to the lineage of Prahlada. I gave my bhakta Prahlada my boon that I would never kill anyone of his line.

I have severed Bana's arms, and, I think, quelled his pride. His teeming army of demons was a burden upon Bhumi Devi, and I have razed those legions. Bana has four arms left. I bless him that they shall never age or weaken, and this bhakta of yours shall have nothing to fear from this day.'

When Krishna blessed Bana, the Asura prostrated at the Blue God's feet. He went into Sonitapura and brought Aniruddha out in a golden chariot, with Usha. Both were beautifully dressed and adorned.

Rudra embraced Krishna, then, setting Aniruddha and Usha before him, the Avatara set out for home with his army. In Dwaraka, all the people, relatives, friends and brahmanas thronged the streets to receive the triumphant homecoming. The highways were freshly washed, and every street corner flew festoons and flags of victory.

Drums of every kind beat celebrant rhythms, while deep conches blew long and reverberant notes over the sound of the waves below.

O Rajan, he that reads or listens to this account of how Krishna fought Siva outside Sonitapura will never know defeat in any form of battle all through his life."

THE TALE OF NRIGA

SRI SUKA SAID, "RAJA, ONE DAY A FEW YADAVA YOUNGSTERS, SAMBA, Pradyumna, Charu, Bhanu and some others, came to the gardens that lay on the outskirts of Dwaraka. They came for sport, and when they had wrestled, run races, and played other vigorous games for a while, they felt thirsty. They began to look for water to drink.

Soon they found an old and shallow well. Peering in, they saw it was dry, but inside lay a most wondrous creature – it was a lizard big as a hill. They thought it had fallen into the old well, and tried to lift it out with ropes. They could not do this, and came to Krishna in some excitement to tell him what they had seen.

He came with them to the well, reached his left hand down into it, and effortlessly picked up the lizard by its tail. The moment Krishna touched it, the creature was transformed, and a celestial being stood there, his skin like molten gold, wearing shimmering raiment, garlands and ornaments.

Krishna knew who this was, but so the others with him could hear that extraordinary being's story, he asked, 'Splendid one, tell us who you are. You must be a great lord of the Devas, for you are so glorious. But tell us what curse turned you into a lizard, a fate you surely did not deserve. We are agog to hear your story!'

When Krishna, who was bliss incarnate, spoke to him, that royal being prostrated at the feet of the Lord, consort of the Devi Lakshmi, laying his jewelled crown at Krishna's dark feet.

He said, 'Lord, I am a king and my name is Nriga. I am one of Ikshvaku's sons, perhaps you have heard my name that was once counted as belonging to one of the munificent of the earth.

Lord, there is nothing that you do not know, who are the witness of all things within and without. Yet, you have asked me and I will relate my story.

Once, I was known to have given away as gifts as many cows as there are grains of sand on earth, stars in the sky, and drops of water that have fallen as rain. They were all fine young milch cows and their calves. I had come by none of these sinfully, but by just means.

They were beautiful animals, gentle, pure, and dappled light grey and brown. I had their horns capped in gold, their hooves shod in silver, and their bodies caparisoned in the finest silks and decked with jewels.

I gave these cows to young and lofty-minded brahmanas, men of profound austerity and deep learning, of flawless character and noble natures, whose families were in need. Not only cows did I give as charity, but gold, houses, elephants, virgin brides with attendant sakhis, gingelly, silver, beds, clothes and jewellery, chariots and many other costly things.

I also undertook yagnas as prescribed in the Vedas. However, one day I made a mistake and gifted a cow to a brahmana, when I had already given that animal away to another brahmana. The cow had run away and found its way back to my herd.

While the second brahmana was leading his gift through the street, the first brahmana accosted him and claimed the cow. The second brahmana retorted that King Nriga had given him the cow. The first one insisted the animal belonged to him, and they decided to come to me to settle their dispute.

They came to my court and one brahmana said I had given him the cow just the previous day, and the other that the second brahmana had stolen the cow from him. I was baffled as to what I should do, for definitely dharma had been breached, and honour, and I had no answer to the dilemma.

I offered each of the brahmanas a hundred thousand cows each, all of which yielded milk more than liberally, if only they would relinquish their claims on the cow of their controversy.

I said to the two, "I am as your servant, O Brahmanas. Save me from becoming a sinner, I beg you. Take a lakh of cows each, but abandon your claims to this one."

The second brahmana, who had possession of the cow said, "I will not give it away." He led the cow away.

The first brahmana, who had lost the animal, said, "I do not care if you give me a million cows!" and he stalked out of my sabha.

Just then, some Yamadutas flashed into my sabha, and took me to the Lord Death, Yama himself.

Yamaraja asked me, "Which would you rather do first, enjoy the fruit of your punya or suffer for your sins? I see no end to your good and generous deeds, and to the joys of heaven you have earned by them."

I replied, "I prefer to suffer for my sins first."

At which, Yama said, "Go down then."

I felt myself fall steeply, and my body turned into that of a monstrous lizard.

Krishna, I was devoted to brahmanas and Rishis, and I was charitable to a fault. I was always anxious to see you, Lord, and perhaps because of all this I never forgot who I once was. While I lay in the well as a lizard, I remembered always that I was King Nriga.

Narayana, even the greatest Yogins only find you after purifying their hearts with long tapasya, and with the Veda as their guide. How wonderful, then, that today you have appeared before me – you the Supreme One, the master of the senses – resplendent before my eyes, even while I was deluded by darkness and ignorance.

Only those that are near moksha find you like this, O Lord of worlds! I am amazed that I have suddenly become so fortunate.'

Nriga was overcome and tears coursed down his face. In an ecstasy he cried, 'Devadeva, Jagannatha, Govinda, Purushottama! Narayana, Hrishikesa, Punyasloka, Achyuta, Avyaya!

I beg you, let me ascend into the heavens now. And wherever, whoever, or whatever I am, let my mind always be devoted to your holy feet. I worship you, Krishna, the Ultimate Being, the source of creation, the abode of all beings, O you that bestow the fruit of karma.'

His hands folded, hymning Krishna, Nriga walked around the Blue God in pradakshina. He laid his head repeatedly at Krishna's feet. Then, a mystic craft flashed down out of the sky, a subtle and beautiful vimana. Krishna laid his hand upon Nriga's head in blessing. Nriga climbed into the vimana, it streaked up into the firmament and vanished.

Now Krishna turned to the Yadavas who were with him. He, the soul of dharma, Devaki's son, the Brahmanyadeva, God of the brahmanas, said 'Not the flames of the apocalypse can consume or withstand a mote of the wealth of a true brahmana. What, then can a king hope to take from a holy one?

The Halahala is the most virulent of poisons, but there is a cure even for that. But he that takes what belongs to a brahmana drinks a poison that will consume him from within and without.

Fire consumes whatever it touches but it can be doused with water. The fire ignited by the fire-stick that is the property of a brahmana will consume an entire clan, down to its very roots.

If a man deprives a brahmana of his property, or takes it with grudging or partial consent, three following generations of his family shall be destroyed by the sin he incurs when he enjoys that property or possession.

If a man takes a brahmana's possession by force, ten generations of the past and ten to come of his family shall be devastated by that sin. If ever, blinded by wealth and power, a king sees a brahmana's wealth as easy pickings for himself, he is being a fool – as surely as night follows day, ruin will come to him if he takes what belongs to a holy man. He will neither enjoy what he takes nor escape falling into hell.

There is a terrible naraka called kumbhipaka. The sinful king that deprives a holy brahmana of his living, so he cannot maintain his family or feed the guests that come to visit him, finds that hell for himself and his family. They remain in it, in torment, for as many years as the particles of dust that have been wetted by the tears of the brahmana to whom he has caused suffering.

Any man that robs a brahmana of his means of livelihood, whether given to the holy one by himself or another, is likely to be born as a worm living in faeces for sixty thousand years.

I pray that I never come to possess anything that a brahmana owns. For he that eyes what belongs to a holy man cuts his own life short. If he is a king, he swiftly finds defeat at the hands of his enemies, and loses his throne and kingdom. Later, such kings turn into serpents, always waiting to sting.passersby.

So, you, O my sons and clansmen – never seek to avenge yourselves upon a brahmana even if he harms you or curses you. Always bow down before a holy man. You have seen how I treat the Sages; for your own good, imitate me in this. Know that I will punish those that injure a true brahmana in any way.

Even if a man takes or receives a brahmana's property unwittingly, the man falls. You have heard Nriga's story from his lips; he did not know that he was giving away a cow that he had already given to another brahmana.'

Thus spoke Krishna, who sanctifies the three worlds."

BALARAMA AND YAMUNA

SRI SUKA SAID, "BALARAMA LONGED TO MEET NANDA, YASODHA, ROHINI, and his old gopa friends in Gokula. One day he rode back to the gypsy settlement on the hem of Vrindavana. What a welcome he had from the gopas and gopis!

He prostrated at the feet of his parents, and they blessed him. Nanda cried, 'Great leader of the Yadavas, for so many years your brother and you protected us, and we scarcely knew who you truly were!'

But then, he was just their son again, and they made him sit in their laps just as they used to when he was a boy, hugging and kissing him, and bathing him in tears of joy.

Balarama paid obeisance and his respects to the elders of Vraja, and the younger gopas in turn took his blessings as their elder and, many of them, as their childhood friend. It was as if no long years had passed since he left Gokula – they cracked the same jokes together and all seemed exactly as it was before: idyllic.

Rohini and Yasodha let him bathe, then fed him a magnificent meal they quickly prepared: all his favourite dishes. Then he lolled on a rope cot in Nanda's yard, and the gopas and gopis, who had given themselves body and soul to Krishna, slowly surrounded him.

He chatted happily with them, truly feeling he was home now, for he never cared for the opulent city life, with its constant tensions, politics, and what he perceived as being its deviousness, its shallowness.

Overjoyed to see him again, their voices thick with emotion, the gopas asked Rama, 'How are all our relatives in Mathura and Dwaraka, Balarama?

Now that Krishna and you are married, with your own families, do you ever think of us?'

'Ah, how fortunate that Kamsa is dead, and that your clan is free again, all your Yadu kinsmen. And it is even more wonderful to know about marvellous Dwaraka, city in the sea, where no enemies can attack you.'

Delighted by his presence, the gopis came clustering around him. Blushing, smiling, they asked, 'And how is the darling of the city women? We hope he is well. Does he care to remember at least his parents here? Or his old family?'

'Will he deign to visit Gokula, if only to see his mother Yasodha?'

Another was bolder, 'Does he remember anything of all that we did for him? How we served him and loved him?'

'Does he care to ever think of how we abandoned our mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, husbands and even our children for his sake? We haven't forgotten how he did not hesitate a moment before breaking his bonds of love with us before he left.'

'He hardly cared to say farewell!'

'But he swore with his honeyed tongue that he would return soon, and we were fools enough to believe him. Oh, how we trusted him.'

'Tell us how the sophisticated city women can trust a fickle ingrate. Tell us if they do trust him at all or if he has met his match in them.'

'Oh, what difference will it make if they are city women? How will they resist his smile, his sweet voice, his beautiful form and face?'

'How will they resist his kisses and his wild embraces?'

'He is master of love and lies, no one can resist him.'

Another said defiantly, 'Why should we talk about him? Have we nothing else to discuss? If he can live without us, so can we do without him!'

'The only difference,' murmured another gopi, 'is that we shall spend our time in sorrow.'

A silence fell among the women. Suddenly a tide of memories of Krishna, his face, his beautiful body, the sweet nothings he whispered to them, his kisses, his embraces in the forest, swept over the gopis. As one, they burst into tears.

Balarama rose from his cot and comforted them. He wiped their tears, and gave them a message of love and remembrance that Krishna had sent from Dwaraka.

Balarama spent the months of Chaitra and Vaisakha in Gokula, and he spent all his time with the gopis, especially his nights. They clung to him, and he made love to them in the heart of green Vrindavana.

One autumn night of a brilliant full moon, he came with his bevy of gypsy cowherdesses to the fragrant woods on the banks of the Yamuna. The river sparkled and shone in the silvery light, and the breeze blew the scent of the royal lotuses that floated, unfurled, on the river over Rama and the women.

Watching them, Varuna Deva made the Devi of wine, Varuni, who rose once from the Kshirasagara, pour her heady drink into a hollow in a nearby tree. Its irresistible aroma spread like sweet fire over the riverbank.

Balarama, who was softly caressing some of the gopis, stopped and grew attentive. Getting up from the lush grass, he unerringly traced the scent of the unearthly wine to the tree. The women and he drank thirstily out of thick leaf cups, and from cupped palms. The hollow filled as soon as they emptied it, and soon they were all wonderfully drunk, Balarama most of all.

His arms around the women, his eyes rolling with the wine he had imbibed, he staggered through Vrindavana like a bull elephant in musth. The gopis sang his praises – how strong he was, yet how loving and gentle, and such a virile lover!

Rama wore one earring; he draped himself with a score of garlands, and one especially vivid vanamala of fresh lilies and lotuses. Beads of sweat covered his magnificent body like dewdrops, and his completely happy smile shone in the moonlight.

After wandering drunkenly for a while, Rama and the gopis returned to the banks of the Yamuna and flopped down some hundred feet from the water. In a thick voice, Balarama called to the river, 'O Yamuna, I want to bathe in your waters, but I am too drunk to walk over to you. Come flow near me, so my women and I can swim and make love in your deep blue currents!'

But the river Goddess thought he was just some drunkard, and ignored him. At which, Balarama jumped up with a roar, seized his halayudha and dragged up the entire width of the midnight blue river with it. The Yamuna flowed partly through the air now, in agony. She screamed in pain.

Beside himself, Balarama raged, 'Wanton, accursed river! I will split you into a hundred rillets with my weapon.'

Now the Devi Yamuna appeared, trembling, before the Avatara, and fell at his feet. 'Awesome Rama!' she cried. 'What does a poor river know of your tameless, cosmic might? Why, you support the very universe with just a small portion of yourself, O Ananta! What am I then before you?

Almighty Samkarshana, I seek refuge at your sacred feet. I beg you, release me, forgive me, I did not know who you were, I did not know you were divine!'

At which, with a grunt, the kindly Rama let her down again. Now she flowed seductively near him, and Balarama and the gopis waded into her cool water – even as a tusker does with his cows, to sport as he pleased. Soon, the women's laughter, and then, their sighs and moans filled the moonlit river and her bank.

When they had their fill of bathing and making love in the moon-drenched river, Balarama and the gopis came out of the water. A shining goddess, Kanti Devi, materialised there and gave Rama a gift of two brilliant blue garments to wear. She gave him unworldly ornaments of incalculable value, and some fresh garlands, too.

The gopis rubbed sandalwood paste on his skin, and when the fair Balarama wore the blue robes, a golden chain, the ornaments and garlands, he was as splendid as Indra's elephant Airavata, the white."

Suka Deva paused, then said with a smile, "Parikshit, even today the Yamuna is bent in her course, where Balarama dragged her from her banks, and where she later flowed for him – as if to be a sign upon the Earth of his strength.

Every night Balarama spent in Gokula, he spent with the gopis. He was so fascinated by them, and their sweetness, that sixty nights, dark and mooned, passed like a single one."

PAUNDRAKA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "WHILE BALARAMA WAS HAPPY IN VRINDAVANA, one day back in Dwaraka, Krishna received the strangest message from Paundraka, the foolish king of Karusha. The message said that he, Paundraka, was the real Vaasudeva and Avatara, and Krishna was an impostor!

The truth was that some cunning courtiers and friends actually persuaded the naïve Paundraka that he was indeed the Avatara, born to save the world. He believed in the fantasy just as a boy believes he has become a king when his friend sets a toy crown on his head while playing. Paundraka sent a messenger to Krishna, whose ways are always inscrutable.

Paundraka's messenger arrived in Dwaraka and presented himself in the sabha of the Yadavas. There he recited his king's message to the lotus-eyed Blue God.

'I, Paundraka, am the true Vaasudeva, who have incarnated in this world from my love and mercy for all the living. Krishna, I command you to relinquish the false title of Vaasudeva that you have assumed.

Yadava you have usurped my emblems and my weapons, too. Fool, come and give them up to me. Seek refuge in me and you shall find shelter. Otherwise, come and fight me!'

When Ugrasena and the other kshatriyas in the Yadava court heard this, they burst out laughing. Krishna's eyes glinted dangerously and he replied in a soft voice, 'Certainly I will come to give you my weapons, but in battle against you and your witless friends. As for refuge, when you lie dead on the field, with your face turned up to the sky, surrounded by vultures and crows, you shall find shelter in the ravening dogs that tear your corpse to shreds.'

The poor messenger almost sullied himself at the sudden menace in Krishna. He was glad to leave Dwaraka with his life. He rode back to Paundraka, who was staying in Kasi, with his friend, the king of that land, and delivered Krishna's message to them.

Krishna got into his chariot and rode to Kasi. When Paundraka heard he was coming, he came out of his friend's city with two aksauhinis to face the Lord. Kasi Raja rode with his friend, bringing three aksauhinis himself.

Arriving outside the holy city, Krishna saw Paundraka for the first time, and his laughter rang everywhere in golden peals. He saw Paundraka made up like an actor, playing the role of Krishna!

He wore yellow pitambara robes, carried replicas of the Sudarshana Chakra, the Panchajanya, the Kaumodaki, and the Saringa. Hair by hair, he had the women in his harem stick a Srivatsa on his chest. He wore a scarlet imitation of the Kaustubha ruby, a vanamala, crocodile earrings, a crown fashioned just like Krishna's, a peacock feather, and flew a banner of the Golden Eagle on his ratha.

Roaring, Paundraka and Kasi's legions flew at Krishna, casting tridents, maces, clubs and lances at him. The twanging of ten thousand bows filled the air, and clouds of arrows flared at the Avatara. But Krishna fought like Time.

In a moment, which seemed to stand still for him, he razed those five teeming legions of elephants, horses, chariot, and footsoldiers – with mace, sword, disk and arrows. He blazed like the flames of the Pralaya, and quickly the battlefield, strewn with the dismembered corpses of horses, elephants, men, mules, camels and shattered chariots, resembled Rudra's playground when time ends.

Then a shocked Paundraka was face to face with the terrible Avatara. Krishna said, 'Paundraka, you sent your messenger asking for my weapons. I have brought them for you. You asked me to seek refuge at your feet. That

I will do when I cannot fight you anymore. Until then, come let us have battle. Here are my weapons that you wanted!'

In an eyeflash, he ruined Paundraka's chariot with a swath of arrows. Then Krishna loosed the Sudarshana Chakra at the deluded king of Karusha. The blinding disk took Paundraka's head from his neck, even as Indra once severed the crests of the mountains of the earth with his Vajra.

Turning to the Raja of Kasi, Krishna cut off his head, too, with a flurry of arrows. The arrows plucked that king's head from his throat like a lotus bud, and carried it back to the gates of Kasi, as a gale might a flower.

Having decimated his enemies, single-handed, Krishna returned triumphantly to Dwaraka. Siddhas in the air sang his praises. It is told that since Paundraka identified himself with Krishna, daily, wearing clothes like his and ornaments, and carrying weapons and insignia similar to the Avatara's – identifying with him – the king of Karusha attained a celestial form exactly like the Lord's when the Blue God slew him: Sarupya.

Meanwhile, in Kasi, the citizens saw a severed head fly through the air, borne by arrows, and its jewelled earrings sparkling, land within the gates, bloody and with staring eyes. They surrounded the grisly thing, wondering whose it was, until recognition dawned on them that it was their king's head.

Out streamed Kasiraja's wives and children, lamenting his death. His people, to whom he had been dear, cried, 'Ah, we are undone! Our king is slain in this gruesome way.'

Kasiraja's eldest son Sudakshina performed the last rites for his father and swore that he would avenge his death. When the time of mourning ended, Sudakshina worshipped Siva, who is the final sovereign of Kasi, with an intense tapasya. His Acharya showed him the way of worshipping the Lord Rudra, who is always easily pleased.

Soon, Siva appeared as a mass of light before Sudakshina and said, 'Ask for a boon, and it shall be yours.'

Sudakshina chose, 'Show me the way to avenge my father's death.'

Siva said, 'Seek the help of your brahmanas to perform an aabhichara prayoga, using black magic to worship the Dakshinagni. The occult fire will do whatever you ask it to, just as a sacrificial priest obeys the master of a yagna.

If your ritual is performed against anyone that is not a holy man himself, the Agni and its bhutas will certainly wreak whatever revenge you wish upon your enemy.'

Siva vanished. Sudakshina undertook the aabhichara prayoga before a sacrificial fire. As his priests chanted the mantras of the left-hand path from the Atharva Veda, the flames in the agni kunda assumed a fearsome form. Agni emerged from the fire pit as a Kritya, a Fire Spirit.

The spirit's hair was like red-hot copper, as was its beard. His eyes spewed sparks. Great fangs thrust themselves from his grimacing mouth, and his brows were thick and sharply arched. With a tongue that was a flame he licked his thick lips.

He was naked and carried a trisula. He strode, growling, around Sudakshina's yagnashala, upon legs thick and long as palm trees. The ground shook beneath his feet. At a command from Sudakshina's priest, the fierce spirit flew toward Dwaraka, scorching everything in his way black.

The Yadavas saw the terrifying apparition of embodied sorcery, and panicked like animals trapped in a forest fire. They ran to Krishna, crying, 'Save us, Lord of worlds! A dreadful fire spirit is upon us and the city is in flames.'

Calm as ever, still smiling, Krishna said, 'Don't be afraid, you are not in danger while I am here.'

He knew what the Kritya was, that it was a spirit of Siva's Dakshinagni, and he loosed the Sudarshana Chakra against it. Brilliant as ten million suns, blazing like the fire with which time ends, filling the four quarters, the very sky with its terrific lustre, the Chakra flew at the Kritya.

For no more than a moment could the fire spirit withstand the weapon of Vishnu. Humiliated, burning head hung, it turned and flew back to Kasi. In a towering rage of shame, it consumed Sudakshina and his priests, then subsided back into the agni kunda with a long hiss.

The Sudarshana Chakra, however, pursued the Kritya all the way to Kasi, where it fell in wrath upon that city, and burnt up all its magnificent palaces and mansions, its sabhas, homes, bazaars, lofty gates, and cattle sheds. It razed the treasuries, granaries, elephant pens and stables, its chariot stands and capacious halls of alms, where the poor and travellers were housed and fed.

Having razed Kasi, Siva's own city that had fallen to sin, the blazing wheel of time, Mahavishnu's Chakra flew blithely back to Krishna.

Rajan, he that listens to this legend of Krishna, with reverence in his heart and a focused mind, shall be freed of all his sins and become a fortunate man indeed."

DWIVIDHA

KING PARIKSHIT SAID, "MY LORD, I BEG YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT Balarama. I am fascinated by his exploits. How magnificent he was, fathomless and infinitely charming and powerful."

Sri Suka said, "Dwividha was a mighty vanara. He was a friend of Narakasura, and once upon a time a minister of Sugriva himself. He was the great Mainda's brother, and had fought beside Sri Rama of old when the prince of Ayodhya crossed to Lanka to rescue Sita from Ravana.

He owed Narakasura a debt of gratitude, and when Dwividha heard that Krishna had killed Naraka, the vanara began to take revenge in his friend's name. He set out to devastate Krishna's country, Anarta. He burnt down towns and villages in the night; he sealed quarries and destroyed cowherd settlements.

The ancient monkey was as strong as ten thousand elephants. He would wade into the ocean and, growing gigantic, beat up tidal waves that dashed ashore, sweeping away villages and towns built there.

He was a great and good monkey, who had lived long past his time, and had turned to evil. He raided the asramas of the holiest Rishis, uprooted the trees of their sacred groves, and left his excrement and urine in their sacrificial fires.

He would seal lovers into mountain caves by rolling boulders across the cavemouths, as the wasp does the worm in his hive. He became a highway rapist, violating noble women journeying from city to city. Many princesses fell victim to his lust. Thus, Dwividha raged everywhere, bringing havoc with him wherever he went.

One day, he heard strains of the sweetest songs coming from the Raivataka hill. He swarmed up the hillside, excited by the women's voices that sang, anticipating a fine chance to have his way with them.

Assuming the form of a small monkey, and stalking his prey like a predator, Dwividha saw Balarama, handsome as a Deva, surrounded by a throng of beautiful women, who sang to him with all their hearts. Rama was obviously drunk, for his eyes were red and rolled, and he walked unsteadily, swaying like an elephant in musth.

Dwividha sat in a tree, and shook its branches. When Balarama and the women looked up, he made faces at them, and grunted rudely at them. The women thought the little monkey was fetching, and laughed at it.

The monkey turned to show them his bright red bottom, and then he waggled his eyebrows at them and winked – all very lewdly. Balarama was annoyed, and threw some stones at the creature to chase him off.

Instead of being frightened, the monkey swooped down from the tree, snatched the jar of wine Rama was carrying, and dashed it on the ground. He chattered and laughed, flew at the women, lifted their clothes and fondled them obscenely.

With a growl, Balarama seized up his halayudha and his mace to kill the monkey. Suddenly, Dwividha the vanara stood facing him. Taller than the tree he had sat in, Dwividha pulled up that tree, charged Balarama before the Yadava recovered from his surprise, and smashed the tree squarely down on Rama's head. The trunk snapped like a twig.

The women now screamed, but the drunken Balarama – who was, of course, Samkarshana himself – did not even sway at the tremendous blow, but stood steady as a mountain. It was Dwividha's turn to be startled. Now Balarama swung his mace, the Sunanda, striking the vanara on his head. He opened a deep gash there and blood flowed down Dwividha's face in streams, just as rivers of red earth do down the sides of a mountain in the monsoon.

Unperturbed, Dwividha seized up another tree, stripped its leaves away quick as thinking, and aimed another blow at Balarama. Rama truncated the second tree with his halayudha; he cut it into slivers. The vanara pulled up another tree and cast it like a javelin at Balarama, who pulverised it with his fists.

So they fought, elementally, until the woods all round had no tree left standing! Now Dwividha began to cast rocks at Rama, and heavy stones. Balarama struck them into dust with his fists, his chest and, most of all, with his halayudha and his Sunanda.

Desperately, Dwividha rushed at Rama and struck him squarely on the chest with his fist like iron. How many rakshasas that blow had killed on Lanka – great demons of the treta yuga. Now, it did not so much as rock this fair human back on his heels.

Balarama flung down his mace and his ploughshare weapon. He also struck Dwividha back with a bunched fist on his shoulder. The vanara fell, with blood gushing from his mouth. When he fell, the mountain, with its caves, shook like boats out at sea in a storm.

The sky echoed with the glad shouts of Deva and Devarishi, Siddha, Charana, Gandharva and Apsara. Thus Balarama killed the almost invincible Dwividha, who had become such a bane upon the Earth, and had been calling his death to him for so long. Then Rama returned to Dwaraka and his palace with his women."

SAMBA AND THE KURUS

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "RAJAN, LISTEN TO ANOTHER STORY OF THE magnificent Balarama.

Once, Krishna and Jambavati's son, Samba, carried off Duryodhana's daughter Lakshmanaa from her swayamvara, from under the eyes of the mighty Kurus. The Kauravas fumed that he had abducted the princess, who, after all, had not chosen him to be her groom.

Karna and some others cried, 'Let us catch the boy and make him our captive. We shall see what the Yadavas can do. From our goodwill, thinking they are related to us, we gave them the kingdom that they now enjoy.

They have grown arrogant, that this stripling dares take our princess from us. Let the Vrishnis come to Hastinapura to rescue the boy, and we will teach them such a lesson that they will turn forever to ways of peace, even as the mind does when the senses have been restrained.'

The Kuru patriarch Bheeshma gave his approval, and led by Karna himself, the Kauravas set out after Samba. When he heard them coming, he turned his chariot round and picked up his bow. He faced them like a young lion, with no trace of fear despite being alone.

Karna and the rest covered the radiant prince in a cloud of arrows. But he stood his ground, even as the lion does when a pack of dogs attacks it. With some exceptional chariotry he dodged the Kurus' shafts; then, quick as light, his bow twanging like thunder, he shot Karna and five other Kuru kshatriyas with six arrows in the space of a wish.

Every ratha that pursued him he struck with four shafts each, at speed that defied seeing. He pierced the sarathies and their warriors, each with an arrow. Roaring and roused, the Kuru maharathikas shattered Samba's chariot.

There were too many of them, each a great hero, and he could not withstand them all for long. One of them slew his charioteer; another clove the bow in the hands of Krishna's son. Leaping down from their own chariots, they swarmed at him. Overpowering him, binding him securely with light strong rope, they brought him back to Hastinapura, and their Princess Lakshmanaa, too.

Timely as ever, Narada Muni arrived in Dwaraka with the news. The Yadavas were furious, and Ugrasena, their king, urged them to take an army against the Kurus at once. But Balarama protested – he hated the thought of battle between the Vrishnis and the Kurus.

He placated the outraged Yadavas, and said he would go himself to Hastinapura and bring Samba back peacefully. After all, had he not taught Duryodhana the art of mace-fighting, was he not Duryodhana's Guru, whom the Kaurava loved dearly, especially since Balarama openly preferred him to his cousin Bheema?

Krishna was also for taking fire to the Kurus, however Balarama set out on his own, with just a token force of soldiers, and a number of Yadava elders and brahmanas with him, to emphasise that he came in peace. He rode in his bright chariot.

Arriving at the city of elephants, Balarama did not enter the city but waited in a park just outside the city-gates. He sent Uddhava to King Dhritarashtra. Uddhava entered the ancient Kuru sabha and presented himself formally, greeting the king and his court respectfully, each according to their status and age.

He told Bheeshma, Dhritarashtra, Drona, Baahlika, Duryodhana and the others that Balarama had come to Hastinapura and waited in the woodland garden outside the gates. Uddhava saw the spontaneous delight upon the faces of all the Kurus, for they were truly fond of their awesome kinsman.

They welcomed Uddhava warmly, feted him, and then came out of the city to receive Balarama. They came with a fine cow and arghya for Krishna's elder brother. The Kauravas, whose master he had been, and the others who knew how great he was, all prostrated at Rama's feet.

Balarama asked after their families and welfare, then suddenly drawing himself erect, changing his naturally kindly tone, declared, 'I have come as the messenger of Ugrasena, our king, and king of kings. I ask you to listen to what he says to you, and to do as he asks.

We have heard how many of you banded together, broke dharma by attacking a lone young man, and took our nephew Samba your captive. For the time, in the interest of peace and goodwill between relatives, I am ignoring what you have done. I only ask that you set Samba free at once.'

A moment's silence followed, then the Kauravas' faces turned red. They said acidly to the Vrishnis, 'This is wonderful! Ah, time is mighty indeed, when a lowly shoe seeks to ride upon a crowned head.

We let these Yadavas marry into our clan. We treated them as equals, by eating and drinking with them at the same table, by having them live under our roof, in our palaces. Why, we gave them the throne and the kingdom that they enjoy today, out of kindness and generosity.

How else would they have a crown or a throne, a sovereign parasol or chamaras and royal sankhas? But we are men that have fed milk to a cobra – one day, the serpent will sting the hand that feeds it. Look how the upstarts dare come to our very gates to give us orders!

O Balarama, can a lamb pull a lion's prey out of his mouth? Dare you come here and use that haughty tone of voice with the scions of the House of Kuru. Have you forgotten who we are? Unless we decide to show you mercy there is nothing you can do against our might. Why, we are protected by Bheeshma, Drona and Arjuna, and even Indra dare not provoke us.'

Turning their backs on Balarama and the Vrishnis, the Kurus swaggered back into their city. Proud they were of their lofty birth, their wealth and power, their allies. Balarama's eyes turned red as cherries. He gave a laugh that was at once a roar of rage. His face was red, too, and truly dreadful to behold.

Softly, dangerously, he said, 'Those that are slaves to their pride will never wish for a peaceful solution to any disagreement. Like beasts, they understand and obey only the language of the stick.

I curse myself that I came here in peace! Krishna was angry and wanted war, as did all the other irate Yadus. I disregarded them, and came here like a fool, trusting the Kurus. I now see how they have repaid me for my trust – with humiliation and abuse! Ah, they are dimwitted, evil-hearted warmongers.'

His face grew redder as he continued, and his eyes blazed more and more. 'How dare they insult the name of our King Ugrasena? He is the lord of the Bhojas, the Vrishnis, and the Andhakas; even Indra and the Lokapalas honour his wishes.

How dare these puny Kurus dishonour Krishna, to whom the Devas gave the Sudharma, who took the Parijata from Amravati at his will, and whom the ones of light could not resist. The Devi Sri, of all fortune, serves Krishna's sacred feet. He is the Lord, but these vainglorious fools say he is not worthy of having royal insignia, and that they conferred the kingdom we rule upon us!

Brahma, Parameshwara, Lakshmi Devi, and I all bow our heads at his feet, knowing him to be the God of Gods – we who are all amsas of him whose padadhuli sanctifies the Deities that sanctify the three worlds. And these Kurus dare claim that we are enjoying a kingdom that they gave us, that we are the lowly shoe, and they the crowned head!

Truly, they are as drunk with wealth as the commonest fool who has taken more wine than he can stand.'

He paused, trembling with fury, then roared, 'Enough! How will anyone who can crush these fools tolerate their flaming insults? I will wipe this race of Kurus from the face of the earth.'

He got up, his halayudha smoking in his hands, and he looked as if he meant to consume the three realms with its recondite flames. A God enraged now, Balarama strode over to the city walls of Hastinapura.

In a wink, he hooked one end of his ploughshare weapon under those walls, and roaring so the sky shook, dragged the city of elephants into the Ganga flowing nearby! Hastinapura rocked upon the currents of the river like some huge and absurd boat.

In less time than it takes me to tell you, O Parikshit, your ancestors, the Kurus, came out of their gates with Samba and Lakshmanaa. Hands folded, quaking, they stood humble before Balarama.

The Kurus, Duryodhana and his brothers, Bheeshma, Drona, and the others cried, 'Lord, we bow before you, who are the support of the universe! We forgot who you are, and we beg you to forgive us. We were arrogant, stupid and malicious in what we did and the way we spoke to you. Forgive us, O merciful one.

You cause, preserve and destroy the universe, while you are Un-born yourself, and always just your own support. The Mahatmas all say that the universe is your toy, for you are fond of play.

O Adisesha with the thousand hoods! You bear this universe upon just one of your hoods, playfully. When the Pralaya arrives, you withdraw the worlds into yourself again, and then just you remain, immaculate and alone.

O most holy one, you have assumed a sattvik form to preserve dharma. You show anger only to bring us back to the path of truth, and never out of hatred or ill will. Maker of galaxies, all-pervasive, you who are the focus of the Siddhis, immutable, and beyond decay – we salute you! Ananta, we seek refuge in you, Lord!'

As Hastinapura swayed and shook, its people and nobility prostrated themselves at Balarama's feet. They sang hymns to him. He forgave them, and set the city back on solid ground. He put an end to their fear and granted them his protection.

Now Duryodhana fetched a lavish dowry for his daughter, upon whom he so doted. Six thousand two hundred elephants he gave – each one sixty years, auspicious and wise. He gave a hundred and twenty thousand horses of the finest pedigree, and six thousand chariots worked with gold, bright as suns.

He also gifted a thousand noble sakhis, all beautiful and decked in priceless jewellery, to go with his daughter.

Balarama received all this formally, on behalf of the Yadavas, then setting his nephew Samba and the young hero's new wife, Lakshmanaa, before him, set out home for Dwaraka.

The people of the Sea City came out in throngs to welcome Rama. He went straight to the Sudhrama and told Krishna, Ugrasena and the other Yadava noblemen all that had transpired outside the gates of Hastinapura.

Until today, the city of elephants, capital of the Kurus, stands awkwardly on the banks of the Ganga, where Balarama once dragged her. She stands as if she might fall into the sacred river again!"

KRISHNA, THE GRIHASTA

SRI SUKA SAID, "WHEN NARADA MUNI HEARD THAT KRISHNA HAD KILLED Narakasura, and brought the sixteen thousand women from the Demon's harem to Dwaraka, and kept them all as his wives, the Devarishi's curiosity was aroused.

Narada came to the Sea City to investigate the truth of the amazing tale. Not even he could believe that one man – even if he were Krishna – could possibly husband sixteen thousand women simultaneously, in different palaces.

Narada did not quite believe the fabulous rumour he had heard, and he came to Dwaraka to discover the truth for himself. The trees and plants of the Sea City were always in bloom in its parks and gardens. The air was fragrant and full of birdsong and the humming of bees.

Narada entered Dwarka and looked around in some wonder at the marvel she was. Swans floated in regal flotillas upon the pools and lakes of the unworldly city. Cranes stood among the richness of lotuses, petals echoingly colourful – blue, white, and crimson. Lily and the divine saugandhika grew here.

As in a dream, Narada saw the nine hundred thousand magical mansions of Dwaraka, wrought by Viswakarman in crystal and silver, encrusted with sapphires, and furnished with various artefacts made of gold and jewels not of the Earth.

Wide were the highways of the Ocean City, wider than any Narada Muni had ever seen in Swarga or Bhumi. Enchanting were its crossroads and bazaars, its sprawling stables, its huge sabhas, its inner and outer courtyards, its great and brilliant banners fluttering in the sea wind upon their lofty staffs, and giving shade to the seats below them.

The roads were all freshly washed in scented water, and such a fine redolence mingled with the fresh sea air. Gazing around in fascination, Narada arrived at Krishna's palace and harem, which the Lokapalas worshipped. Narada had heard that Viswakarman had exhausted his genius building this quarter of Dwaraka, which was a city within a city.

Without announcing himself, the Sage, Brahma's itinerant son, padded into one of the sixteen thousand mansions, in which Krishna kept his wives. The edifice took Narada's breath away – coral pillars resting on blocks of vaidurya, walls of Indranila, and cool, shining floors.

The Muni saw Viswakarman's precious canopies, from which strings of pearl dangled, each pearl a small moon. He saw beds and seats, made of ivory, encrusted with gemstones, inlaid with gold, every one of them exemplifying a perfect blend of tastes – of Heaven and Earth.

Narada saw beautiful serving-maids in attendance everywhere, fair and dusky, all of them richly attired and bejewelled. He saw male servitors, too, strong, wearing bright clothes, turbans, gem-studded earrings, and fine coats of silk.

The Sage saw peacocks perched on beams of breathtaking craft; some danced to their own strange songs in wide verandas and passages. It seemed they mistook the smoke of the incense burning in that mansion, and issuing from its windows for rainclouds! Golden and silver lamps, also jewelled, lit the capacious rooms within.

Peering in through the widest windows, Narada Muni saw Rukmini – for he had walked into the greatest of all the mansions in the quarter of Krishna's harem. He saw Krishna reclining upon a bed, while Rukmini, like a sliver of a full moon, fanned him with a golden-hafted chowrie. Her sakhis surrounded them, to bring them whatever they might need.

Krishna saw Narada and sprang up from Rukmini's bed. He ran to the Rishi and laid his crowned head at the feet of Brahma's son. Embracing him lovingly, and taking Narada's hand, Krishna led the Sage to his own throne, and made him sit there.

The water that washes the feet of Narayana flows through the three worlds as the holy Ganga, which takes away the sins of men. Now, that Vishnu's Avatara, dark Krishna, the First Cause, the Jagadguru, and the embodiment of dharma, humbly washed the feet of Narada and feelingly sprinkled the water over his own, Krishna's, head.

Appositely indeed has he been named Brahmanya Deva, the God of brahmanas – for he honours the holy ones as Gods. Narayana, the eternal one, the friend of the ancient Rishi Nara, worshipped Narada as the scriptures ordain a holy Sage should be adored when he visits one's home.

Then, having received the Muni thus, and having addressed some affectionate words of welcome to him, Krishna asked, 'Mahamuni, tell me, of what service can I be to your worship?'

Said Narada, 'Almighty Lord, it is small wonder that you who love all beings punish sinners, even kill them. For those that die by your hand also find moksha. For some time I have been aware that you have incarnated yourself to protect the world and to save all those that dwell in it.

Lord, I have been blessed enough to see your feet like lotuses, which confer nirvana upon your bhaktas, which those with the most fathomless intellects, like Brahma, always cherish and adore in their hearts. Your holy feet are the only support of those who want to climb out from this dark well of samsara, into eternal light.

I wander the worlds, it is true: but always meditating upon your feet. All I ask of you is that you bless me that the memory, the image, of your lotus feet never leave my heart.'

Thus Narada spoke to Krishna; but in his heart he was restless to discover the truth about the sixteen thousand wives in their separate palaces – to unravel the mystery of the Blue God's Yogamaya. He bowed quickly to Krishna and left Rukmini's palace.

Abandoning ceremony, Narada Muni, Brahma's august son, ran to the next palace. Here, too, he found Krishna with another wife and with

Uddhava. The three of them were at dice. Here, as well, Krishna saw Narada and sprang up to make him welcome. He washed the Sage's feet, sprinkled his own head with the water, and led the Devarishi to a fine seat.

Krishna asked, 'Holy One, when did you come? There is little that the imperfect can do for perfect ones like yourself, who have left desire behind you. Yet, I would be so honoured if I can serve you in any way: that would make my life fruitful. Only ask me, my lord.'

But Narada only bowed again, not replying, and hurried out of that palace also, and to the next one. Here, he found Krishna's playing with his small children by the wife in that mansion.

Again, the Muni ran out, and by now he was truly fevered. In the next grand home, he saw Krishna making offerings to the Ahavaniyagni, the sacred fire; in another palace, Narada saw the Blue God at the ritual of the Panchamahayagna; in another palace, he saw Krishna overseeing the feeding of holy men.

Dashing in disarray from one palace to the next, Narada saw Krishna in each of them, at various tasks and pleasures – eating himself after feeding some brahmanas, at his sandhya rites, chanting the Gayatri mantra, with a sword and shield displaying his awesome skills to a martial wife, teaching her.

Elsewhere in Dwaraka, in other palaces, as well as in a spinning vision, Narada Muni saw Krishna leading a complement of horse, elephant, and chariots through the streets; he saw him asleep in bed, with bards softly singing his praises; he saw him discussing matters of state, with Uddhava and other noblemen and ministers.

Narada saw Krishna in enclosed, crystal pools of water, swimming, and at play with the most luscious women. He saw him gifting a thousand milch cows to some deserving brahmanas; he saw him sitting rapt, listening to the sacred Puranas and Itihasas; he saw him cracking jokes with another wife, and laughing heartily.

The Muni saw the Avatara pursuing the paths of dharma, artha, and kama, too. He saw him in dhyana, absorbed in the Brahman, who is beyond the ephemera of Prakriti. He saw the Dark One serving his elders with his own hands – looking after their every need, and so lovingly.

He saw Krishna arguing, gently as well as firmly; he saw him mete out punishment to those that had strayed, to bring them back to dharma. He saw him working with Balarama, for the welfare of his bhaktas.

He saw him finding suitable husbands and wives for daughters and sons – his own, and the children of others. He saw the Blue God performing marriage rites with every ceremony, and grandeur. Krishna participated in ceremonies where the daughters were sent to their husbands' homes, and daughters-in-law welcomed to their husbands' homes.

Narada saw how astonished the people were to see the Lord of all Yogis engage in these mundane and domestic rituals, so avidly. It was a grand vision that overwhelmed Narada Muni in Dwaraka – he saw Krishna in so many places at once: performing mahayagnas to the various Devas, with expert priests at his side; digging wells and making tanks for his people to drink from and swim in; creating magnificent gardens and constructing fine guest houses for visitors to the Sea City.

He saw the Avatara hunting on horseback, with his Yadava clansmen around him, and killing wild beasts that were fit to be offered at sacrifices, and eaten. He saw the Dark One moving, disguised, through the homes and streets of his city, to discover the real nature of the lives and characters of his people, their joys and sorrows.

Narada suddenly found himself standing before Krishna himself, and the wild vision left the Sage. Smiling ecstatically, the Devarishi said, 'O Master of yoga! I have seen your power today, your maya, which even the greatest Yogis cannot penetrate.

Now give me leave to go, for I mean to roam the world again, my heart full of your glory, singing about your lila, which sanctifies this Earth.'

Krishna said softly, and his tone was God's own, 'Muni, it is true that I lead all these lives as a grihasta, but I am the origin, the embodiment, and the upholder of dharma. Do not be deluded; none of what you saw binds me. I am always unattached, and free.'

So, Devarishi Narada saw Krishna in his sixteen thousand wives' homes, at the same time, husbanding them all, showing how precious were the paths of dharma, artha, and kama.

Narada was amazed, he was delighted, and he went away satisfied from Dwaraka, his heart brimming with more love and bhakti than ever for the Blue God. He saw that Narayana Himself had taken a human form for the weal of all beings, a form in which he manifested all his divine powers – thus, he lived simultaneously with sixteen thousand, one hundred and eight wives, and enjoyed their shy gazes, their smiles and their deep loving.

He that listens to the legends of Krishna's divine sport – of creation, nurture, and destruction – when he lived upon the Earth, that man shall certainly find bhakti for the Lord, who is the one that grants moksha."

TWO MESSENGERS IN DWARAKA

SRI SUKA SAID, "WHEN DAWN BROKE OVER DWARAKA, AND THE COCKS crowed to greet the rising sun, Krishna's wives, sleeping naked in his arms, cursed the day – for they would have to rise and be apart from his embrace.

The bees awoke to the scent of mandara flowers borne on the dawn breeze, and began buzzing and humming. Their sounds provided the signal for the cockerels of the morning and indeed every other bird in the gardens and parklands of the magical city. They all broke into song, as if they were bards whose task it was to rouse Krishna.

Rukmini lay in her lord's arms, and she loathed the auspicious hour of daybreak. He would awaken and take away his embrace. He rose, the Blue God, at the brahmamuhurta, washed ritually in holy water, and sat in dhyana, his mind fixed upon the Atman, which knows no ignorance but only light and peace.

He adored the Devas, brahmanas, the elders and manes, his kinsmen, his sisters, holy cows, indeed all beings – all his creations, expressions of his power, and none apart from him. With his dark and divine hands, he touched many objects in his prayer rooms that were auspicious and sacred.

Slowly, he finished his morning worship, and dressed. He adorned his body, the most priceless ornament of all, with scented unguents, garments of silk, jewellery, and garlands of flowers. He cast his gaze upon some ghee, a mirror, a cow, a bull, a brahmana, and some idols of the Gods. He came out and gave gifts to men of all the varnas, to the people of Dwaraka and to his servants.

Nothing made him happier than pleasing his people, whom he loved. He went among them. With his hands, he gave brahmans, friends, his subjects, and consorts, variously, garlands, betel leaves, sandalwood paste, and other auspicious little morning gifts.

Now, his sarathy Daruka arrived, prostrated before Krishna, and stood before him, smiling, and with folded hands. He had brought Krishna's chariot yoked to his four unearthly steeds, of which Sugriva was the leader.

Krishna greeted Daruka, taking the charioteer's folded hands in his own palms. Taking Uddhava and Satyaki with him, Krishna climbed into the chariot just as the sun climbed over the peak of the Udaya Mountain. The shy and amorous looks of his sixteen thousands wives sought to keep him back, but with a smile he broke those subtle shackles, and took their hearts with him.

Krishna left the palaces of sixteen thousand, one hundred and eight women. He emerged into the light of day, and climbed into his chariot as a single being! Every morning, he would repeat this miracle and no one would penetrate its mystery.

With all his Yadavas around him, Krishna arrived at his sabha, the Sudharma, and entered that great court of the Gods inside which the six sorrows do not come. Krishna sat in his Lion throne, and with the Yadu heroes around him, he was like the full moon in a clear autumn sky, surrounded by the stars.

Rajan, masterly and wise comedians entertained the sabha with wry and profound jokes and jests. Musicians and the greatest dancers in the Sea City performed for the Avatara – gurus and sishyas. The disciples, young women, sang sweetly, they danced to the melodies and rhythms of vina, mridanga, venu, moorja, and other instruments.

The bards of the Sudharma sang Krishna's praises; the minstrels and heralds hymned him loudly. Now the brahmanas chanted the Vedas, and later the finest orators described the lives and legends of the awesome kings of old. This was the Blue One's daily routine.

One day a bedraggled, travel-worn messenger arrived at the doors of the crystal court. With Krishna's permission, the guards allowed the stranger to enter the Sudharma.

The man prostrated before Krishna, the Paramatman and, tears springing in his eyes, he began to describe the plight of the kings rotting in the dungeons of Jarasandha. Jarasandha had set out on a campaign of conquests, and any king that did not submit to him and become his vassal he captured and flung into his prisons in Girivraja, his capital.

Twenty thousand kshatriyas he held in his fetid catacombs. The messenger now delivered their message to Krishna. 'Krishna, inscrutable one, dispeller of the sorrows of those that seek refuge in you! We kshatriyas are still victims of samsara, and plunged in our sense of ego and individuality – hence, we fear the cycle of transmigration, the wheel of birth and rebirth. We seek sanctuary in you.

As long as men are attached to forbidden karma, as long as they do not tread the path of dharma and bhakti that you preach, time will continue to scatter their fondest hopes and longings, to lay waste their keenest efforts. We bow to you, Lord, who are verily that Kaala, the sleepless Spirit of Time.

You and your amsa Balarama have incarnated into this world. Yet, Jarasandha and other evil ones hold sway over the Earth, breaking your law as they please, and making good men suffer. We cannot fathom how this continues – perhaps we ourselves are paying for sins of lives gone by, ancient karma?

Lord, the pleasures of the kingly life are fleeting, like the joys of a dream. All life is governed by fate, beyond one's control; it is always uncertain. We kshatriyas only carry the burden of our dharma to rule and protect our people, to carry the burden of living, and this body as good as a corpse, with its attendant anxieties, its mortal terrors.

Surely, we are wretches, and pathetic, for we follow the path of desire, abandoning the eternal rapture of the Atman that bhaktas enjoy who renounce desire. We, instead, have become slaves to your mysterious maya, and all the pain that arises from it.

Lord, we beg you, free us from this bondage of karma called Jarasandha. He is terrible and no kshatriya is his equal for he is as strong as a thousand elephants. By himself, he vanquished us kings of the Earth, easily as a lion might a flock of ewes, and incarcerated us in his dungeons.

O you who bear the Sudarshana Chakra defeated him seventeen times in battle, but it seems that on the eighteenth occasion he prevailed even against you, who choose to be like a mortal man, though your prowess is infinite.

We kings are loyal to you, and for that he tyrannises us, after his apparent triumph over you. Krishna, invincible one, we are Jarasandha's captives in misery. You are our only hope, and we beg you, do as you see fit.'

Having delivered his message, the kings' emissary fell quiet, then said, 'This is the prayer the prisoners in Magadha send through me. They seek sanctuary at your feet, and they long to see you. I, also, implore you, Lord, save these kings, or they are lost, for Jarasandha means to sacrifice them like beasts to Siva.'

Even as the messenger finished, Narada Muni strolled into the Sudharma. His tawny jata was piled high in dreadlocks upon his head, and he was as bright as a sliver of the sun. Krishna, lord of all the divine forces that rule the world, saw him, and rose from his throne in delight. His court rose with him, and all of them prostrated at the feet of the Devarishi.

Krishna made Narada sit upon his own throne, and offered him padya and arghya. Smiling, his eyes twinkling, the Avatara said, 'I trust all the worlds are blissful, that you, holy one, range over them. We are surely blessed that you, Muni, who constantly travels through the three realms, have come to our city today. For we can learn whatever we wish about Bhumi, Swarga, or Patala, since there is nothing that happens in any of these that is unknown to you!

So, tell us, divine Narada, about our cousins, the sons of Pandu.'

Narada said, 'Pervasive One, you permeate creation with your power, and live inside all things as fire in ashes. Not Brahma, Creator of the worlds, is beyond your maya. More than once, I have been witness to the wonder of your maya, and it does not surprise me anymore.

Who can fathom your motives for sending forth and withdrawing this universe from yourself with your impenetrable mayashakti? This world and its cause, your maya, appear as being real only because they spring from you and are dependent on you.

We salute you, who shine forth as this world, which is entirely apart from your true nature! I seek shelter in you, who appear through the ages as these various Lilavataras, these incarnations infused with the sacred flame of your transcendent glory. You offer them as waylights to jivas, hopelessly enmeshed in the wheel of births and deaths, who cannot find a way out of their misery.

Though this is Who you are, O Lord, since you ask I will tell you about a venture upon which your cousin and devotee Yudhishtira the Pandava has now bent his mind. The son of Pandu wants to become an Emperor, and in that cause worships you, O Krishna, with that greatest of imperial yagnas – a Rajasuya.

He asks for your approval and your blessing. The Devas themselves shall come to attend Yudhishtira's Rajasuya yagna, as will all the kings of the earth, who wish to meet you.

Master of us all, even the lowest-born who listen to the legends of your life, praise you, or meditate upon you, are purified and attain grace. How then shall I describe what the noble-born will find by seeing you, and touching you, Krishna?

Saviour of the worlds, your name and your renown illumine and sanctify Swarga, Bhumi and Patala. The precious waters that wash your feet flow as the Mandakini in Heaven, as Ganga on Earth, and as the Bhogavati in the realms of nether, in Rasatala.

Holiest One, you must attend Yudhishtira's Rajasuya yagna, and bless the sacrifice of your aunt Kunti's sons.'

Saying this much, Narada fell silent. Krishna looked around him, and the Yadavas were obviously keener to march on Magadha, and vanquish the old enemy Jarasandha, who held so many kshatriyas of the Earth captive in despicable conditions.

With a smile, Krishna turned to Uddhava, 'You tell us what we should do, Uddhava. There is no man that knows statecraft as well as you, no one whom we can trust as implicitly as you to advise us in this matter. I will do as you say.'

Uddhava considered for a moment, then answered Krishna, who knew all things but chose to feign ignorance, for his own reasons, or to allow the brilliant Uddhava to shine."

TO INDRAPRASTHA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "UDDHAVA WAS INDEED AS WISE AND DISCERNING as Krishna believed. He had listened carefully to the messenger of the imprisoned kings, to Narada Muni, to the murmurs of the Yadavas who obviously wanted to attack Jarasandha, and to what the subtle Krishna said.

Now Uddhava said, 'Lord, You must certainly do as Devarishi Narada asks, and help your father's nephews, the Pandavas, perform their Rajasuya yagna successfully. So, also, you must rescue the imprisoned kings, who have sent their messenger to seek your protection.

Only a king who has conquered all the kingdoms through the length and breadth of Bharatavarsha is fit to undertake a Rajasuya yagna, and to proclaim himself an emperor. To my mind, you need to subdue Jarasandha not only to satisfy the messenger of the kings he has thrown in prison, but also to help Yudhishtira accomplish his imperial yagna.

Surely, to release the captive kings from their bondage shall be a great and worthy deed, which will bring glory to your name, O Govinda. Yet, who will face Jarasandha, strong as a thousand elephants, in battle; who in this world is strong enough to defeat him in combat? There is only one man who is at least as strong as the master of Magadha – your cousin Bheemasena, the Pandava.

Jarasandha has a boon by which not even an army of a hundred aksauhinis can vanquish him. He can only be killed in single combat, a duel to the death. O Krishna, this Jarasandha is devoted to brahmanas; he never refuses a brahmana anything.

Bheema must go to him in the guise of a brahmana and ask him to fight a duel. You my Lord, must go with him, and be present when they fight, for then surely Bheema must prevail over the foster-son of the Rakshasi Jara.

You, O Lord of us all, are Formless Time, and Brahma and Siva are but your instruments for creating and destroying the universe. The gopis sing your praises; the Rishis and your bhaktas like us do the same.

We all hymn your exploits – how, in other Avataras, you saved the king elephant from the jaws of the crocodile; how you saved Sita from Ravana's palace; how in this incarnation, you rescued your parents from Kamsa's prison. I have no doubt that the wives of the kings held captive in Girivraja will also soon sing your praises, and how you saved their husbands. They will sing that what you did was save them, by saving their men.

Krishna, slaying Jarasandha will further the mission for which you have been born – to rid Bhumi Devi of her burden of evil. For he is a great sovereign of the forces of darkness upon the Earth. A Rajasuya yagna is a rare occurrence; it is a fruition of the karma of the jivas of the world. A Rajasuya happens when the good and the devout, like Yudhishtira, his brothers, and those that support them reap the fruit of their punya, and when fell men like Jarasandha and his allies are punished for their countless sins.'

Even Devarishi Narada applauded Uddhava's impeccable counsel, as did all the Yadava chieftains, and Krishna himself. Krishna immediately gave orders for preparations to be made for a journey to Indraprastha. He asked his sarathy Daruka to prepare his own supernal chariot, the Jaitra.

Krishna went to meet Vasudeva and Devaki, to have their permission and blessings. He would take some of his wives and sons with him, so their servitors and sakhis must also prepare for the journey – taking their clothes and jewellery with them, as befitted a royal retinue.

Finally, Krishna came to King Ugrasena and took his leave to depart. Then he climbed into his magical chariot, which flew the flag of the Golden Eagle, and he set out, to the beating of drums, the blowing of trumpets, horns, and deep conches, martial music echoing to the sky. A formidable

Yadava force went with him – infantry, regiments of cavalry led by their mighty Vrishni commanders.

Krishna's wives and sons followed in golden palanquins and on horseback. Costly clothes they wore, priceless ornaments, flowers, and the women, exquisite perfumes and anointments on their velvet skins. Heavily armed guards surrounded the queens' palanquins, their swords and shields glinting in the sun.

Lovely sakhis and dancing girls, all superbly turned out, also travelled to Indraprastha in their own litters and in covered, colourful carts. Other members of the royal household, cooks and servitors, bards and musicians also went. Tents, luxuriant carpets, and everything else they needed to make camp along their journey went with them, in oxcarts and loaded onto the back of other beasts of burden – camels, buffaloes, asses, mules, and she-elephants.

Brilliant flags waved above that mighty Yadu force, and below these, a sea of parasols, turbans, helmets, and other exotic headgear, chowries, shining weapons and armour. Such a vast din those legions made under the sun, like the sea roaring when agitated by whales.

Meanwhile, after being reassured by Krishna that he would espouse Yudhishtira's ambition, Narada Muni prostrated before the Lord and flew up into the sky from Dwaraka, in a trail of light. His mind and heart, however, remained with the Blue One, in sacred communion.

Krishna promised the captive kings' messenger, too, 'The kings that sent you shall see good fortune again, for I will have Jarasandha of Magadha slain.'

The man returned secretly to the kings and gave them Krishna's message. They waited anxiously to see the Avatara, for they now aspired not only to physical freedom but spiritual liberation as well.

Krishna, who was Hari incarnate, the Supreme Being, passed through the lands of Anarta, Sauvira, the desert Maru, the field of Kurukshetra, where he would return one fateful day, as his cousin Arjuna's charioteer.

Many mountains, forests, rivers, towns, villages, gypsy cowherders' settlements, deep mines, he passed. He forded the rivers Drishadhvati and

Saraswati, and finally crossing the kingdoms of the Panchalas and the Matsyas, he arrived at Indraprastha, the capital of the Pandavas.

When Yudhishtira heard that Krishna, who is so hard for any mortal to catch a glimpse of unless they have been blessed, had arrived in his very city, the Pandava came out from his city gates to welcome the Blue One, bringing his kinsmen and his Gurus with him.

Yudhishtira welcomed Krishna even as the indriyas do prana, upon which their existence depends – Krishna, the single power behind the mind and all its faculties. With intense love, Yudhishtira received his incarnate cousin, and the musicians he brought with him welcomed the Avatara with ecstatic songs, while the brahmanas of the city chanted the Vedas resonantly.

Repeatedly, Yudhishtira embraced Krishna, and the Pandava's heart melted in adoration: how long he had waited for this moment! With his arms wrapped tightly around his Lord, in whom the Goddess Lakshmi dwells, it is said that Pandu's eldest son was absorbed in the bliss that transcends time. He lost consciousness of himself, the world around him; his eyes streamed tears of joy, and the hairs on his body stood on end.

Now Bheema, the second Pandava, came forward smiling to embrace his cousin. He, too, found himself transported on a tide of unworldly bliss as soon as Krishna touched him. Arjuna and the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, embraced the Dark One, and they also were absorbed in the transcendent rapture that He embodied. Helplessly, they sobbed for that joy, like small children.

Arjuna then hugged Krishna again, and Nakula and Sahadeva prostrated at his feet. Krishna paid obeisance to the brahmanas of Indraprastha, and to the elders, and they welcomed him fervently, too.

Ceremonially and affectionately, Krishna greeted the chieftains of the various clans present there – the Kurus, the Srinjayas, and the Kekayas. Bards and minstrels, singers, jesters, and brahmanas chanting the Veda: all these welcomed the lotus-eyed Avatara in an effervescence of joy.

Song and dance filled the streets of the city of marvels, which Viswakarman had created for the Pandavas, at Krishna's instance. Pulsating mridanga, sweet venu and vina, booming sankhas, and every other kind of musical and percussion instrument played with complete abandon.

Thus, the Lord, whose legends are beyond everything else that is considered sacred, entered the city decked out so colourfully to receive him. He passed through the gates, surrounded by his friends and kinsmen, all of whom cried out his name and praised him as bhaktas do their God.

The highways of the city had been washed with water scented with piquant ichor from the temples of tuskers in musth. Banners hung everywhere, in profusion, from golden archways, and auspicious urns filled with holy water stood at every gate and street corner. The entrance to every home in Indraprastha was adorned with intricate and tasteful designs filled with flower petals in every brilliant hue.

Handsome indeed were the men and women of Yudhishtira's city, and they had all turned out to catch a glimpse of the Avatara. They came wearing their finest apparel, and their most precious ornaments and jewels, and had daubed their skins with the finest perfumes. The women wore jasmine garlands in their long lustrous hair.

Incense floated out from the open windows of the airy mansions that lined the king's road. Bright flags fluttered in the breeze, from golden dome and silver minaret. Some young women, who were at their household chores and others, who were even making love to their husbands, came rushing out of their homes to catch a glimpse of He whose sight to the mortal eye is like sipping from a cup of amrita. Hastily pulling on their clothes, their hair loose, beside themselves with excitement, they came running to look at the Blue One.

Some women flew out onto their roofs, saw Krishna, with his consorts, making his way down the king's highway, escorted by elephants, horses, chariots and footsoldiers, both Yadava and Kuru. They gazed at him as if the sight would leave their eyes if they stopped. Breathless, they flung cascades of flowers down upon him. When he looked up, they favoured him with amorous smiles, and in their hearts they clasped him in naked arms.

The women of Indraprastha saw Krishna's queens around him, like stars around the full moon. The women said, 'What fabulous punya these women must have done! Ah, the Lord himself, in human form, has husbanded them.'

'Oh, look how beautiful he is,' sighed one, as if she could not believe such beauty could exist.

'Look at his eyes, the way he looks around him.'

'Look at his smile!'

As he went along, knots of citizens and the heads of various guilds – important personalities among the people – came forward with every kind of auspicious gift and offering, which they pressed into his hands, and then touched his feet. Always smiling, he laid his palms upon their heads and blessed them.

Finally, arriving at the Pandavas' magnificent palace, Krishna and his queens found themselves being welcomed by the women of the palace, who stood wide-eyed and quivering with adoration, to see him at last.

The women ushered Krishna into the palace, and into the private apartments. The Pandavas' mother and their wife, the incomparably lovely and dark Draupadi, rose to greet Krishna. Kunti saw her divine nephew and, with a cry, ran to clasp him in her arms.

All this while, Yudhishtira stood numbed with delight, and unable to decide how precisely to express the tide of devotion and love that surged in his heart for the one that was the Lord of all the Devas.

Meanwhile, Krishna in turn respectfully greeted Kunti and the other older women of the palace. He greeted Draupadi, and then his own sister, Subhadra, who was also Arjuna's wife, came forward to hug him.

Directed by Kunti, Draupadi welcomed Krishna's queens with various rituals. She welcomed Rukmini, Satyabhama, Jambavati, Kalindi, Mitravinda, Saibya, Satya, and the others who had journeyed to Indraprastha with fine offerings of silk clothes and flowers.

During his stay in the city named after Indra, Krishna received fresh forms of the most lavish hospitality each day from the adoring Yudhishtira. Krishna lived with his wives, ministers and immediate retinue in

Yudhishtira's own palace, in royal apartments that were kept just for him. In nearby palaces, mansions, and excellent barracks, according to each one's status, the rest of the Yadava force stayed in luxury.

Some say the palace in which Krishna stayed was the fabulous sabha created for the Pandavas by the Asura artisan, the matchless Mayaa Danava, in return for Arjuna having saved his life when Agni Deva consumed the Khandava vana, with the help of Krishna and Arjuna.

For some months, Krishna remained in Indraprastha and spent most of his days roaming the city and its surrounding forests in the company of Arjuna."

JARASANDHA

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONE DAY, WHEN A FEW WEEKS HAD GONE BY IN SPORT and pleasure, in banquets and every form of entertainment, Krishna sat in the court of the Pandavas, with Yudhishtira. The sabha was full of great Rishis, brahmanas, kshatriyas, and vaishyas. All the Pandavas were there, as were their gurus, the elders of the clans, other kinsmen and friends.

Yudhishtira turned shyly to Krishna, and said, 'Govinda, Lord, I want to worship the Devas, who are manifestations of your own elemental powers, with that noblest sacrifice, a Rajasuya yagna.

Lord from whose navel the lotus that bears the universe sprouts, I beg you, help me fulfil my wish. Only those who always serve your feet, meditate upon you, or sing your glory, conquer the darkness and evil, which obscure the vision of the spirit, and find eternal bliss. And everything else that they wish for comes to them.

God of gods, Devadeva, let the world see the power and the glory which a man attains if he worships your lotus feet. Let the Kurus and the Srinjayas see the difference between that fate of your bhaktas and those that do not worship you.

In your eyes, who are the Brahman, the soul of all, whose inherent nature is infinite bliss, there is no difference between what is yours and what is not – for nothing exists apart from you. Yet, your grace is upon those that serve you, like the Kalpataru, the tree of wishes that grows in heaven. Those that come to the tree of wishes have their every desire satisfied, but not those who disdain it in their pride.

Even as men serve you and seek sanctuary in you, they find your grace and your blessings – not from any partiality on your part.'

Krishna said, 'Great king, Parantapa, destroyer of your enemies, I support your resolve to perform the imperial yagna. Do as you intend and your fame will spread to the corners of all the worlds.

The Rajasuya is the sovereign of yagnas, the greatest sacrifice, and it will please the Rishis, the Pitrs, the Devas, all our friends, and me. But you must first subdue every kingdom in the land, and receive tribute from their kings, with which wealth you shall undertake the Rajasuya yagna.

Rajan these heroic brothers of yours are born of the Lokapalas, the Gods of the cosmos. As for me, you have already conquered me by conquering yourself, your baser nature. Otherwise, I am invincible, but you have vanquished me with your bhakti and your love. Yudhishtira, no God or man can prevail over the one that dedicates his life to me, the man who is my devotee. He shall have no equal in prowess, in fame, wealth or glory.'

Yudhishtira glowed to listen to what Krishna said; his handsome, gentle face shone in joy. Now he commanded his brothers to go forth and, with their natural might multiplied by Krishna's blessing and his divine prajna, conquer the four quarters of Bharatavarsha in his name.

Sahadeva rode south at the head of a Srinjaya army. Nakula went west, taking the Matsya army with him. Arjuna led the Kekaya legions to the north, and Bheema marched east at the head of a great Madraka force. The four subdued the four quarters, and garnered huge wealth as tribute, for Yudhishtira's Rajasuya yagna.

Yet, one king remained unconquered – Jarasandha of Magadha. Yudhishtira was dismayed. For not as long as a single king did not yield to him, either in friendship or after battle, could he conduct his Rajasuya yagna. Now Krishna proposed the plan that Uddhava had conceived in Dwaraka; he said that the only way to quell Jarasandha was in single combat, and the only one to do it was Bheema.

Just as Uddhava had said they should, Krishna, Arjuna and Bheema disguised themselves as snataka brahmanas, who were no longer students but not grihastas either, and lived by begging for alms. As brahmanas, they went to Girivraja from where Brihadratha's son, the awesome Jarasandha, ruled.

They came into the king's presence at the hour he kept daily for meeting holy men. Jarasandha was giving gifts to brahmanas already, when the three snataka brahmanas, who were anything but brahmanas, said to him, 'Rajan, we are your guests today, come from far away. We have come to beg you for a favour.'

'Give us what we ask, and you shall have rich reward. There is nothing, after all, that those imbued with fortitude cannot bear; nothing forbidden that an evil man will not do; nothing that the generous man will not give away as alms. And he that sees the world with equal eyes, where is his enemy?'

'Yet, the man who, while his always dying body is in good health, fails to please a holy one who asks him for a gift or favour – he is a pitiable creature, and ignoble. He whom the brahmanas of the world do not praise is doomed.'

'You have heard the stories of Harishchandra, Ranti Deva, Mudgala who lived eating paddy grains, the Emperor Sibi, Mahabali, and the legend of the dove and the hunter – all these tell of how great men gained immortality by sacrificing their mortal bodies and comforts.'

Turn by turn they spoke, and Jarasandha listened carefully to their voices of habitual command, he saw their noble warriors' stances and demeanour, the abrasions on their palms and shoulders made by bowstrings. He knew they were most likely kshatriyas, and felt certain he had seen them somewhere before.

Jarasandha thought, 'These are kshatriyas disguised as brahmanas. Yet, I will give them whatever they want, be it not my very life. Mahabali, the great Asura king of old, is my idol. Bali's fame is taintless today,' said the Magadhan to himself, 'though Vishnu came to him disguised as a brahmana, and took everything he owned, and his life too.

He knew full well that the Vamana was Vishnu, his Guru Shukra warned him as much, and that the Dwarf had come for Indra's sake. Great

Bali knew Vishnu had come for his life, but he still offered the Vamana everything he owned, the very Earth, as a gift.

Ah, what does it matter if these three have come to take my life from me. A kshatriya's body, which must inevitably perish one day, has no value if he cannot use it to gain fame for himself and honour, by serving the holy men of the world.'

Thus Jarasandha thought, and he said to Krishna, Bheema and Arjuna, 'Brahmanas, welcome! Tell me what you want from me, and you shall have it, even if it is my severed head that you have come for.'

Krishna replied, smiling, 'Mighty King, grant us a duel, fight any one of us – for we are not brahmanas come to seek alms or gifts, but kshatriyas come seeking battle. This is Pritha's son Bheemasena, the Pandava, and the other is his brother Arjuna. As for me, I am their uncle's son, and your inveterate enemy, O Jarasandha – I am Krishna.'

Jarasandha threw his head back and roared with laughter. Then his eyes turned red as plums, and he hissed, 'Fool, I will gladly give you what you ask. But you are a weakling and a coward, and I will not fight you. You are he that ran away from ancient Mathura and now hide out upon an island in the sea, in terror of me.'

He turned his haughty gaze to Arjuna. 'This one is a mere boy, and too slight and delicate to face me in single combat. Him, also, I will not fight. Bheema, though, might be some match for me. I will fight him. But let your two kingdoms be forfeit when I kill Bheemasena.'

Krishna agreed, 'Or yours when you die!'

Hefting an enormous mace, and giving Bheema another, Jarasandha strode out of his palace, down the king's highway, and out of the city gates. Outside Girivraja, the two selected a piece of level ground as their duelling arena.

Bowing solemnly to each other before they began, they closed and swung out with their great gadas, hard as diamonds. Left and right they wheeled, with careful, knowing movements, as dancers do, or dramatically like actors upon a stage. For all their bulk, they were nimble and swift.

Whenever their maces rang together, they sounded like the clashing tusks of musth-maddened elephants fighting over a cow elephant, or like thunder in the sky. When, however, a blow landed on a combatant's body – shoulder, hip, leg, arm, thigh, collar bone, or other part – the gadas shattered like arkha shakas, the twigs of a sun plant do when you strike an elephant with them.

When their maces were smashed, they flung them down and fought with bare hands, roaring like ten tigers each, their fists hard as iron, and these also were like thunder striking when they landed on the opponent's body. Like bull elephants, Jarasandha and Bheema fought, and there was nothing to choose between them in skill, strength or valour. Neither showed any sign of tiredness, or yielded an inch.

Came evening and deep conches boomed to announce the end of the day's battle. Like the greatest friends, the two titans returned to the city, to the Magadhan's magnificent palace and his even more expansive hospitality.

Thus, seven and twenty days passed – of wild and savage duelling during daylight, and friendship, wonderful wine and banquets during the nights. One night, Bheema came privately to Krishna, and confessed in some shame, 'Madhava, I doubt that I can ever vanquish Jarasandha. I fear he might kill me, and then Yudhishtira and you shall lose everything to him.'

Krishna knew how Jarasandha had been born in two halves, and abandoned in the forest by his mother; how, then, Jara the rakshasi had joined the two halves to bring alive a huge and powerful infant. Krishna knew Jarasandha's secret – the only way he could be killed.

Now the Blue God subtly infused his cousin Bheema with his own grace, so the Pandava's despondency and inconfidence left him. He said rather mysteriously, 'Watch me as you fight him tomorrow, and I will show you how to kill him.' Bheema believed him implicitly.

The next day, the two immense kshatriyas fought again. The day after was amavasya, the day of the new moon, when Jarasandha's strength would be a hundred times what it normally was – for this is the way with all his demon kind. Bheema must kill him today, or perish tomorrow.

Krishna stood beside the combatants watching laconically as they first shattered their morning maces, then began to belabour each other with bare hands. Both giant warriors had tired by now; they fought less wildly, conserving their strength, for only the one that lasted would live.

As they circled, clinched together, suddenly Bheema saw Krishna split a dry twig on the tree against which he leaned, along its length. The Pandava understood what the Avatara meant. In a flash, using the new strength that surged through his body, by Krishna's subtle power, Bheema tripped Jarasandha to the ground, taking him unawares.

Before the Magadhan realised what the Pandava was doing, Bheema planted a leg thick as a young treetrunk on one of Jarasandha's thighs. He grasped his other ankle, and quicker than thinking, tore that demon king in two from his anus to his crown, as an elephant splits the branch of a tree, as Krishna had shown him.

Jarasandha's subjects saw their invincible sovereign lying torn in two just as he had been born. His intestines lay coiling like serpents upon the ground and each half of him now had one leg, one thigh, one testicle, one hip, arm, half a chest, one ear, one eye rolled in the panic of his final moment, and half a mouth with a scream stilled on it.

The people of Girivraja set up a dismal wailing that echoed everywhere. With cries of joy, Arjuna and Krishna rushed forward to embrace the triumphant Bheema. With typical adroitness, Krishna quickly crowned Jarasandha's son – another Sahadeva – king in his father's place, so the people of Magadha were pacified. All he asked in return was that Sahadeva accept Yudhishtira's sovereignty, as his emperor, and attend the Pandava's Rajasuya yagna, bringing proper tribute with him.

Then, the Avatara went to free the kings whom Jarasandha had incarcerated – the other, vital mission that brought him to Girivraja."

THE LIBERATED KINGS

SRI SUKA CONTINUED HIS *BHAGAVATA PURANA*. "TWENTY THOUSAND and eight hundred kings Jarasandha vanquished in battle, as if they were children, and imprisoned them in a harsh camp in a circular valley ringed by steep mountains.

He hardly fed them and their bodies had shrunk with long starvation, the skin hung loose on their bones, with hardly any flesh between skin and bone. The entire prison camp stank with filth accumulated over the months in that cruel place, and the kings were kept like animals in pens. Their fine clothes were rags now, and they were covered in dirt and worse.

Now the twenty thousand came out into freedom again, and saw the Lord before them – blue as a thunderhead, and wearing a brilliant pitambara robe. They saw him four-armed, the Srivatsa whorled on his chest, his eyes red like the inside of a lotus of that hue. His face was impossibly handsome and lambent. He wore glittering crocodile earrings, and in three hands he held a lotus of a thousand petals, the Kaumodaki, the Panchajanya, while the Sudarshana Chakra spun over the forefinger of the fourth hand.

Upon his head was an unearthly crown; he wore a flashing necklace of incalculable value, similar bracelets, a golden girdle set with jewels from other worlds, and armlets. The bloodred Kaustubha glowed deeply upon his chest, amidst vanamalas so fragrant you might float out of your body to sniff their scents.

The starved kings saw him thus, a divine vision before them, and felt all their suffering was worth what they beheld. As one, they fell at his feet, and in their hearts they drank him into their souls with their eyes, licked and tasted him with their tongues, kissed him with their lips, clasped him in their arms, and of course inhaled the scent of him fervently!

The kings gave praise:

'Namaste Devadevesha rapannaartiharaavyaya; prapaanpaahi nah Krishna nirvinnaan Ghorasamsriteh.

Nainam naathaanvasooyaamo Maagadham Madhusudana; Anugraho yad Bhavato raagyaam raajyachyurvibho.

We salute you O Krishna, Lord of all the Gods, who take away the sorrows of your devotees, who are the lord of immortality.

Save us from this dreadful samsara, for we have renounced our attachment to the world and surrendered ourselves to you.

Madhusudana, we bear Jarasandha no ill will anymore – it was because he took our kingdoms from us and imprisoned us that we see you in your glory before our eyes today, and have your blessing.

No king who is attached to power and wealth ever finds final beatitude. Deluded by maya, they begin to think of the ephemeral as being permanent, and to worship wealth. Even as children mistake a mirage in summer to be a pool of water, grown men who lose their discrimination take the fleeting effects of maya to be eternal.

Robbed of their spiritual insight by the arrogance of wealth, always at war with one another out of lust for conquest, we kshatriyas, Lord, caused the death of thousands upon thousands of our subjects. Ruthless we were, and never saw you always standing before us as death and judgement. We were blinded by our hubris, Lord.

Krishna, as time and fate, you snatched our kingdoms and wealth from us, and thereby our pride as well. This was your grace, and by your grace today we see you standing lustrous before us and are able to worship at your feet.

No desire for kingdom, power or wealth binds our spirits after what we have endured. We have discovered how unreal these are – the pleasures of the body, itself a mirage, always decaying and the source of every sickness and pain. Krishna, we no longer lust after the pleasures of Swarga, which are so wondrous to hear described.

Even if we are born again and again, and die as well, bound to the wheel of samsara, tell us how we can always remember your feet like lotuses. Salutations, O Krishna! Salutations, O Paramatman! Over and over, we salute you, Govinda, who removes the obstacles in the paths of those that fall at your feet, seeking alleviation of their sufferings.'

Hymned by the emaciated kings, Krishna, who is truly the one in whom it is worth seeking sanctuary, spoke so sweetly to them, soothing their pain, rejuvenating their tired spirits.

The Lord said, 'Kshatriyas, let it be as you wish – from this moment, all of you shall have the deepest bhakti for me, who am the Atman within you. Kings, it is true what you say that only devotion to God yields the final fruit, the only one worth having.

You have spoken truly – kingdom, power and wealth only make men drunk with pride, and blind them to the truth. Look at all the great kings of the past, who fell because they became inordinately proud. Kartaveerya of the Hehayas, Nahusha, Vena, Ravana, Naraka – all these found nemesis because they were infatuated with wealth.

All things that have a beginning, including the body, surely find an end; so have a care and look within yourselves for that which is immortal, which never began and never ends, and is eternal bliss and peace.

Worship me, O Kshatriyas, and continue to fulfil your dharma, which is to protect your subjects. Sire noble sons and daughters. In joy and adversity, remain equanimous, with your faith unshakeable. I say to you, live without being overly attached to your bodies, seek your joy always in the Atman, practise restraint, and fix your mind upon me in dhyana and love, and finally you will come to me, the Brahman, with some ease.'

Having spoken thus to the liberated kings, Krishna arranged for servitors and maidservants to help them bathe. He told Jarasandha's son Sahadeva to gift them clothes, ornaments, garlands and anointments, such as kshatriyas should wear. When the twenty thousand kings bathed, and had eaten as they had not for many moons, Sahadeva accorded them every luxury in his capital.

Freed by Krishna, the kings shone like the sun and the moon, their earrings sparkling like stars around these in a clear sky, limpid after the last rain of the monsoon. Sahadeva now gave them fine chariots, inlaid with gold and encrusted with jewels. Mounting these, those kshatriyas rode home to their various kingdoms, cheerful again.

The hearts of those kings, after their long ordeal and liberation, were full of a single thought – of Krishna, Lord of the universe. Their minds flowed down the pure streams of the many legends of him, of all that he had done during his life so far, all of it so incredible, so marvellous and sublime.

When they arrived in their myriad capitals, those kings told their subjects those legends, and about Krishna's teachings. Then on, they ruled with the Blue God's wisdom and their bhakti for him as their sceptres.

Krishna bid farewell to Sahadeva, and departed Girivraja with Bheema and Arjuna. Arriving like a triune storm at Indraprastha, they raised their conches to their lips and that city and the very sky echoed with the triumphant notes they blasted on those sankhas. That sound coursed a thrill through the hearts of good men and fetched fear and trembling to the evil.

Knowing they had accomplished his purpose, his heart brimming over with faith, Yudhishtira came out of his gates in joy to welcome Krishna and his brothers. And his cup flowed over, when he heard the details of their adventure and of Bheema's victory from Arjuna and Krishna.

Dharmaputra Yudhishtira was so overwhelmed he could not speak. He embraced Bheema, then stood with folded hands, mutely, before Krishna, and tears streamed down the eldest Pandava's face, in adoration and gratitude that the Avatara had blessed him, and his enterprise.

SISHUPALA OF CHEDI

SRI SUKA SAID, “OVERCOME TO HEAR HOW JARASANDHA HAD DIED, BUT finally finding his voice, the delighted Yudhishtira said, ‘Great gurus of the world like Sanaka, and the Gods of the eight directions, Indra and the other Devas obey your most difficult commands absolutely, never hesitating.

Lotus-eyed, pervasive, transcendent One, it is your deep mystery and divine sport that you facilitate the ambitions of mortals like us, who are slaves to many sorrows, yet pretend to be lords of the earth.

The sun blazes on, never being extinguished, its light and heat unaffected. You are like the sun, Krishna, and nothing you do can diminish your spiritual glory, O you that are without a second, O Brahman, Paramatman. Invincible Madhava, your bhaktas feel no sense of duality, no sense of “I” or “mine”, “you” and “yours”. For these are distinctions that pertain to the body, a thing of Prakriti, and a feature of the animal man.’

Having said this, and the final obstacle in the path of his Rajasuya yagna removed, Pritha’s son Yudhishtira earnestly set about the task at hand. The time had come and he had Krishna’s blessing. First of all the Pandava monarch invited the greatest brahmanas, masters of the Veda, to preside over his sacrifice.

As sacrificial priests, he invited Dwaipayana, Bharadwaja, Sumantu, Gautama, Asita, Vasishta, Chyvana, Kanva, Maitreya, Kavasha, Trita, Viswamitra, Vamadeva, Sumati, Jaimini, Kratu, Paila, Parashara, Garga, Vaisampayana, Atharva, Kashyapa, Dhaumya, Bhargavarama, Aasuri, Vitihotra, Madhuchchanda, Virasena and Akritavrana.

Among the others Yudhishtira invited formally were his Kuru kinsmen and Acharyas in Hastinapura – Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa, Dhritarashtra and his sons, and the sagacious Vidura.

Rajan, besides these, all manner of kshatriyas, from across the length and breadth of the land, were invited, with their subjects. Sudras, vaisyas, kshatriyas, and brahmanas of every hue thronged to the majestic yagnashala, where Yudhishtira would be crowned an emperor.

On an auspicious day, at an auspicious time, the Sages ploughed the chosen plot of land with a golden ploughshare, and they solemnly initiated Yudhishtira into the vows and disciplines of the Rajasuya, according to the Veda.

As in Varuna's ancient Rajasuya, of another yuga, here also every vessel used was made of pure gold. The Devas were invited and would attend the yagna of yagnas – Indra and the Lokapalas; Brahma, Bhava with his ganas; Siddhas, Gandharvas and Vidyadharas; the greatest Rishis from the three realms; Yakshas and Rakshasas. The avians of heaven, Garuda and his kin, were invited, as also Kinnaras and Charanas.

All the anointed sovereigns of Bharatavarsha, and their queens, rode to the yagnashala of the son of Pandu, bhakta of Sri Krishna. Of course, there was perhaps no sacrifice as arduous or difficult as a Rajasuya yagna. But all the wise said that, for a devotee of Krishna, the Avatara, it was not as difficult as it might have been for another king.

The most profound Munis of the world helped the Pandava to fulfil his Rajasuya yagna, even as, once, the Devas helped Varuna perform his imperial sacrifice, which made him Lord of the Earth.

Came the first day of the actual yagna, the day when libations of Soma rasa were offered into the sacred fire and to the Gods, with the sap of the Soma plant. Yudhishtira attended with care and humility on the holy men, the chief witnesses of the yagna, and on the other notable personages who had come to attend his sacrifice.

Then there arrived the time to decide who would have the highest honour at the yagna – the agrapuja, with which only the very greatest person present would be honoured before the sacrifice commenced. There were almost as many opinions as there were worthies present.

Then, Sahadeva jumped up and in a voice that drowned every other, he said, 'Krishna, refuge of his bhaktas, deserves the agrapuja and nobody else! All this world, even the Devas, is only his creation – him manifesting himself in divine play.

He is the soul of this Earth, and of this yagna, too. The sacrificial fire, the havis offered into it, the mantras that are chanted, the gyana yoga, the karma yoga, and dhyana yoga – Krishna is the single goal of all these.

He is without a second, and the universe is his form. O all of you, Mahatmans gathered here, he is birthless, complete in himself, the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the cosmos. With his glance, he makes every yagna, every ritual fruitful, and men find dharma, artha, kama and moksha.

Who else but Krishna is worthy of having the agrapuja? By worshipping him with the agrapuja, we shall adore all beings, and ourselves too. Those that wish for their punya to be endless, for the fruit of their gifts and charity to continue forever, should offer these to Krishna. For he is the soul of us all, the immaculate one, the entirely peaceful, he that sees nothing as being apart from himself.'

With this, Sahadeva sat down, and a moment's silence fell. Then, as a man, the entire gathering approved of what the youngest Pandava had said. The brahmanas agreed whole-heartedly, as did the Rishis and indeed everyone else.

Tears in his eyes, of sheer joy, of huge love, Yudhishtira came forward to offer Krishna the agrapuja. The eldest Pandava washed Krishna's feet, and then he, his queen, his brothers, his ministers, friends and relatives poured that water over their own heads – water that could sanctify the three worlds.

Blind with the tears that would not stop flowing, Yudhishtira offered Krishna priceless silks and golden ornaments. All the sabha stood up, with folded hands. They prostrated to Krishna, with ringing cries of 'Jaya!' and flung showers of petals and flowers over him.

Suddenly, one voice interrupted the auspicious moment. Fuming to hear Krishna being praised, and to see him being offered the agrapuja, Damaghosha's son, Sishupala of Chedi, jumped up with his arms raised over his head and roared angrily at all the others. His eyes blazing, he abused Krishna, who was also his cousin.

Cried Sishupala, 'True indeed is the old adage that nothing can conquer time, for time rules the universe! Otherwise, how would the wisest in all the worlds, and the eldest, be swayed to this madness by the words of a mere boy?

Noble friends, no one is more capable of deciding who is truly worthy of receiving the agrapuja at this yagna than you are. Yet, you allow your judgement to be subverted by this foolish Sahadeva. Just because the callow youth tells you that Krishna deserves to have the first worship in this great assembly, you promptly do as he says? I am amazed!

In this sabha we have the greatest Rishis in the three worlds – all renowned for their austerity, their knowledge, and observance of the sacred disciplines. These are all Mahatmas, whose karma has been burnt up, and who are established in the Brahman. Even the Lokapalas worship these Munis.

How can you give the agrapuja to a black cowherd, and a disgrace to his clan, besides, when these saintly men are present here? Is this not like offering the havis from a yagna to a crow?

This Krishna of yours has no proper varna, asrama, or even a family. He is a profligate, a libertine; where is his virtue? How can you even dream that he deserves this ultimate honour? Have you forgotten that he is a Yadava, from the clan that Yayati cursed? Have you forgotten that men of virtue shun these Vrishnis, for they have always been winebibbers and womanisers?'

He frothed at the mouth; Sishupala was beside himself. 'These have fled the holy land of Brahmarishis, sacred Bharatavarsha, and cower out at sea upon an island. They observe no spiritual traditions nor perform any rituals there. They have no Rishis living among them, in their city or their sabha. Hiding like cowards in that godless Dwaraka, they tyrannise the good people of the world.'

He did not stop there, but continued in more abusive vein, but Krishna ignored him as the lion does a howling jackal. Others in the sabha, though, could not bear to listen to Sishupala's tirade. Many stopped their ears with their palms, and some even got up and walked out of the yagnashala – for, of course, a man's punya is taken from him, and he devolves spiritually, if he remains silent in a place where the Lord or his bhaktas are denigrated.

There were others even more powerfully moved against the king of Chedi. The Pandavas, and kshatriyas from the Matsya, Kekaya, and Srinjaya kingdoms rose, ready to attack Sishupala, to kill him for what he dared say against Krishna.

O scion of the race of Bharata, the deranged Sishupala was hardly intimidated. His torrent of abuse flowed on, now some of it directed against those that would support Krishna. He drew his sword and picked up his shield to face those that came to take physical issue with him.

Languidly, Krishna rose and raised a hand to stop those that would defend his honour. As they drew back, the Sudarshana Chakra appeared over the forefinger of that deep blue hand. Sishupala bounded toward Krishna, who struck his head off in a red explosion with the wheeling disk, sharper than a razor.

Cries of shock, and some of outrage, filled the yagnashala. Sishupala's supporters fled the arena for the sacrifice. As the others watched, a light bright as a drop of the sun emerged from Sishupala's naked throat, flared into Krishna, and was absorbed into him, even like a meteor falling to the Earth.

This was the third birth in which Vishnu's dwarapalaka Jaya had confronted his master and been slain by him – now, finally, the ancient curse of the Kumara Rishis ended for him, and he was reunited with the Lord. As for this demonic birth of his, Sishupala had been so obsessed, in hatred, with Krishna that he finally attained union with the object of his lifelong obsession.*

Now Yudhishtira was undisputed emperor and, as such, he completed his Rajasuya yagna, giving bountiful gifts and wealth to the brahmanas and the other guests that had attended his imperial sacrifice. When he had honoured all those present, properly, he went to the river for the concluding bath, the avabrithasnana.

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* Later, Krishna also kills Dantavakra, who is the other dwarapalaka, Vijaya.

When this was over, the eldest Pandava shone forth in the yagnashala among the other kshatriyas and brahmanas even like Indra, king of the Devas. All those that attended Yudhishtira's Rajasuya paid obeisance to Krishna. They praised him lavishly, as also the sacrifice itself, before they returned to their realms and homes – Devas, men, and beings that inhabit the twilight worlds between Heaven and Earth.

All that came returned in joy, but not Yudhishtira's cousin Duryodhana. A terrible envy burned that Kaurava prince to see the vast wealth and glory of the Pandava emperor. Duryodhana was an amsa of the demon Spirit, Kali; he hated everything that was of goodness and light, and his ravening envy would become the cause of the destruction of the royal house of Kuru, of kshatriya kind itself.

He who hymns glorious Vishnu, who as Krishna slew Sishupala of Chedi, who rescued the twenty thousand imprisoned kings, and enabled the Rajasuya yagna – that man shall surely be purified of his every sin," Sri Suka said to King Parikshit.

THE HUMILIATION OF DURYODHANA

RAJA PARIKSHIT ASKED, "DIVINE SUKA, YOU SAY THAT ALL THE COMMON men, Devas, kshatriyas, indeed everyone who saw the Rajasuya yagna performed, rejoiced. Yet, I have heard that Duryodhana was full of envy and resentment. Why was this?"

Sri Suka replied, "When your grandsire Yudhishtira performed his mahayagna, all his kinsmen, bound to him in love, were given various responsibilities to fulfil. Bheema had charge of the kitchen and Duryodhana of the treasury. Indeed, Krishna told Yudhishtira to give his cousin this vital charge. Naïvely, the noble Pandava agreed, while Krishna knew what the real result would be.

Sahadeva had charge of receiving the guests with arghya, and Nakula collected the stores and provisions. Arjuna served the elders that came, while Krishna himself offered padya, washing the feet of the guests.

Draupadi served the food, while Karna, the soul of generosity, was given the task of distributing gifts. Indeed, all the Yadavas and Kurus, who were close to the Pandava king, had important responsibilities given them – Satyaki, Vikarna, Kritavarman, Vidura, Baahlika's son Bhoorisravas and his brothers, and Santardana and his kinsmen. They all worked joyfully to please Yudhishtira, whom they loved; for he was truly Ajatashatru – the one without an enemy.

When Sishupala found violent salvation from Krishna, when the priests, the guests, the elders and the wise, and everyone dear to the Pandavas had been honoured with gifts, with respectful words, and other ceremonial presentations, Yudhishtira went for the avabhrita snana in the Ganga. This would mark the successful completion of the Rajasuya yagna, which hardly occurs once in a yuga.

Mridangas, sankhas, panavas, dhundhuryas, anakas, gomukhas, and every other kind of percussion instrument played in grand consonance during that ritual bath in the holiest of rivers. Dancing girls performed on the banks of the river, to the abandoned songs of groups of gifted singers. The sounds from vina, venu, and massive cymbals clashing at every crescendo echoed against the sky.

Wearing thick golden necklaces, the visiting kings of the Earth led the procession to the water, with their troops – elephants, cavalry, and legion footsoldiers bearing bright standards in every colour under the sun. Led by Yudhishtira Chakravarti, the Yajaka, master of the sacrifice, the Kurus, Yadavas, Srinjayas, Kambhojas, Kekayas and Kosalas marched with their armies – their tread shaking the Earth.

The great brahmanas marched in a holy throng, chanting the Veda reverberantly, while from on high Deva and Devarishi, Pitr and Gandharva showered a rain of flowers down upon the procession, and sang their praises in unearthly voices and tongues.

The common folk that went with the procession, all turned out in finery, in high spirits, rubbed scented pastes and powders in celebration upon one another, and sprayed each other with coloured water.

The courtesans were the merriest of all – seductively, without inhibition, they smeared their lissom bodies with the pastes of saffron, turmeric, and sandalwood, with the oil, milk, curd and butter that the men flung over them.

Like the Apsaras in their vimanas in the sky, the royal queens and princesses came with their bodyguards to watch the ceremony of the closing ablution. Krishna and his other kshatriyas sprinkled these women with coloured water, while their faces bloomed in joy and flushed in shyness.

With little water cannons, the women also sprayed colour over their kinsmen, and their laughter rang gaily through the procession. Soon, the women were drenched, and breast and dark nipple, shapely thigh, ample buttock, and even hints of black pubis showed through their soaked clothes. Their hair came undone, dishevelled and dripping; the flowers they wore fell from their wreaths. The minds of passionate men surged in desire.

Consecrated as emperor, Yudhishtira rode in a royal chariot adorned with golden chains, yoked to the finest horses. He rose with his consorts beside him, and he was as splendid as the Rajasuya yagna, king of sacrifices, embodied, with its attendant rituals.

The brahmanas performed the patni-samayaaga and the other rites of the avabhrita snana of the sacrificial festival. They made Yudhishtira perform achamana with holy water and bathe in the Ganga with his queen Panchali, also called Krishnaa, the dark and exquisite one.

The sound of the dundubhis of Swarga mingled with those of mortal men of Bhumi. The Gods, divine Sages, and the Manes poured down petal rain over the Pandava in joy.

When Yudhishtira and Draupadi finished bathing, men and women, from every walk of life, community, and varna entered the holy river to bathe, for by such an ablution even the worst sinner would be cleansed of his or her sins.

Yudhishtira put on two unbleached cloths, his royal ornaments, and again offered ceremonial gifts to the ritviks and the other kings. That emperor, Vishnu's bhakta, gave gifts to all his relatives, friends, every visitor and functionary at the yagna, as befitted their age and status.

What joy was upon them all – the faces of the men shone like Devas' faces, as they moved on the banks of the Ganga as in a dream of bliss. Their jewelled earstuds sparkled in the sun, as did their golden necklaces. Bright were the turbans they wore on their fine heads, and their jackets and silken robes, while their pearl strings glowed softly like small moons.

The women were entirely gorgeous after their baths – precious pendants hanging from their long-lobed ears, tresses hanging behind them, luxuriant, and curls framing their shining faces. Their golden girdles swayed above wide hips, round reed-slender waists, as they also roamed the banks of the Ganga in the rich dream of the fulfilment of the Rajasuya yagna.

At last, the time came for farewells, and slowly, the high priests, the scholars of the Veda, the other priests of the yagna, and all the men and women of the four varnas – brahmana, kshatriya, vaisya and sudra – the great kings of the earth, and the Devas, the Devarishis, the Pitrs, the Gandharvas, Apsaras, and the other spirits returned to their various abodes. Before they left, Yudhishtira honoured and worshipped them, as was each one's due.

Those that attended the Rajasuya yagna went away still eulogising the awesome and sacred sacrifice of Rajarishi Yudhishtira, great servant of Hari. They felt they could never do justice with their praise to what they had witnessed – they were like men that had drunk amrita, and knew they could never have enough of the immortal nectar.

Yudhishtira bid sad and loving farewell to his guests, but he could not bear to be parted from Krishna and his other close kinsfolk yet, and persuaded them to remain with him for a while. Out of his love for the Pandava, Krishna stayed on, though he sent Samba and most of the other Yadava chieftains back to Dwaraka.

So, O Kshatriya, with Krishna's grace upon him, Yudhishtira effortlessly crossed the sea of his heart's ambition – to perform the sacrifice of all sacrifices, the Rajasuya yagna. Though at first the noble son of Pandu had been reticent, and inconfident that he was worthy to undertake the yagna, now all his anxiety left him and his mind was at peace. For, after all, he had performed the yagna to raise the spirit of his dead father Pandu into Devaloka, from Patala where Pandu, mighty kshatriya, languished in frustration.

When Duryodhana saw the splendour of Yudhishtira's city and his palace, and the glory that the Rajasuya yagna brought his cousin, green envy stung his heart like some terrible serpent.

The unearthly Asura builder, the incomparable genius Mayaa, had created Yudhishtira's palace and its court – the Mayaasabha that was the embodiment of magnificence. It combined the finest styles and excellences of the greatest palaces of Bhumi, Swarga and Patala: the realms of humans, the Gods and the Demons.

In that palace, Panchali served her husband, who was now sovereign of the entire world. In every fibre of his being, with all his heart and soul, Duryodhana, the Kaurava, lusted after whatever Yudhishtira possessed – his vast kingdom, his city, his palace, and most of all, his dark and peerless queen Draupadi. In that lust, envy blazed intolerably within him; it consumed him.

Within Yudhishtira's palace, Duryodhana saw Krishna's thousand consorts, each with a face lambent as the Devi Lakshmi's. Their gait was slow and languid, for their hips were heavy. Their fine feet chimed with the soft sound of golden anklets as they moved, so full of grace.

They wore heavy necklaces and pendants, whose gold had turned red from the saffron powder with which they dusted their bosoms. Black and rich were their tresses and their dangling earrings quivered and swayed as they moved.

One morning, Yudhishtira sat in the Mayaa sabha upon his majestic throne of gold. He was like Indra himself. Bards sang his praises softly, for he would not have them sing these loud. Around him his brothers and kinsmen sat – nearest of all, his beloved Krishna, who sat right beside the Pandava, and was as an eye to him.

Duryodhana came to that sabha with his brothers. Haughtily he came, wearing a crown and many heavy necklaces and other ornaments. He held his sword in his hand and abused at the guards at the doors – all from his dreadful feelings of inferiority and to assert his importance.

Mayaa had incorporated some subtle magical elements in his sabha – meant to deceive those that entered with darkness in their hearts, meant to create illusions and to warn Yudhishtira that the one deceived was an enemy.

Now Duryodhana thought he saw a lovely pool of water inlaid near the entrance to the wonderful sabha. He picked up his robes and coat, but, of course, it was only a mirage of water and his feet found solid floor. The Pandavas and the others there smiled at the startled look on his face.

A few paces on, as the Kaurava strode forward in pique, he fell straight into a pool of water, which, for the world, had seemed like the finest marble flooring to him. Such a cry escaped his lips, and he was soaked to his fine jewelled crown.

Rajan, when Bheema saw this, he burst into loud rude laughter, and quickly all the kings and their queens, who sat in the Mayaa sabha, joined him. Yudhishtira jumped to his feet and glared at Bheema, but Krishna winked at the second Pandava, encouraging him. Bheema laughed louder, and even the servants of the palace joined him – for they all knew what was in Duryodhana's heart that he had fallen into the cunning pool.

Above all the other laughter, even Bheema's, Duryodhana heard a woman's laugh – the laugh of an empress, full of glee and scorn. He heard the queen of the Pandavas, the dark and perfect Panchali's laughter, and it burned his ears and entered his heart like a fire, which could never be extinguished: except, perhaps, with some savage revenge, with blood.

Trembling in shame, Duryodhana pulled himself up out of the pool. Drenched, dripping water, red-faced, he drew himself erect, and without a word, turned on his heel and stalked out of the Mayaa sabha.

Behind him, every good man in that court murmured in sympathy, most of all Yudhishtira, who even tried to go after his humiliated cousin and bring him back. But Krishna restrained him with a look, and the Avatara said not a word. The Blue God's eyes glinted with mysterious light, for he had sown the seed that would result in the great war with which the age would end – the Mahabharata yuddha, which would see the house of Kuru and the race of the kshatriyas destroyed.

Krishna had set in motion a train of events to lighten the burden of the Earth, the mission for which he had been born.

This, O Parikshit, is how Duryodhana was humiliated and it became the final reason for his raging envy of the Rajasuya yagna of Yudhishtira, and ignited his hatred for his cousins into the conflagration that would consume millions and millions of kshatriya lives."

SALVA

SAID SRI SUKA, "O KING, LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT ANOTHER OF KRISHNA'S marvellous doings, how he killed Salva, lord of the Saubha.

Salva was a friend of Sishupala, and he was with Jarasandha and his allies when the Yadavas crushed them, when Krishna took Rukmini for himself from her father's city. That day, in the presence of all the other kings, Salva swore an impetuous oath: 'I will rid the Earth of the race of Yadavas, and all of you shall see my might.'

Having sworn this, the foolish Salva began a fervid worship of the Lord Siva to accomplish his purpose. All he would eat each day was a few grains of sand. At the end of a year of this tapasya, the omnipotent Siva, Parvati's consort, granted his bhakta Salva a boon.

Salva asked, 'Lord, give me a magical craft, a vimana which no Deva, Asura, Gandharva or man can destroy. Give me a flying ship that can travel anywhere I will it to, by land, air, and sea, and be a scourge to the Vrishnis of Dwaraka.'

Siva, Lord of the Mountain, granted Salva's boon. He told Mayaa, the vanquisher of his enemies, to build a metal craft for that king. Using his genius and occult powers, Mayaa built a metal sky ship for Salva, and it was as big as a palace. It was called Saubha.

The Saubha was mantled in sorcery, which made it invisible, and it could indeed go anywhere Salva chose. No sooner did he have his extraordinary craft than Salva flew straight toward Dwaraka, to wreak revenge upon his sworn enemies, the Yadavas.

Bharatarishabha, O Bull of the race of Bharata, Salva took a teeming army with him also, and attacked the Sea City. Landing from the air, his legions devastated the woodlands and gardens on the outskirts of Dwaraka. They ruined the gopuras and the great gates to the city, the outer walls, the mansions of many storeys, the playing fields.

From above, the Saubha rained down a ceaseless torrent of deadly weapon – huge boulders whistled down from that craft, trees like awesome spears flashed down, bolts of lighting, rains of rocks and stones, eerie fire-serpents, spinning cyclones, palls of toxic dust. All these brought swift devastation to the city of wonders – even as once, in another age, the flying Tripura, triune cities of Mayaa's demons, did to the precious and natural Earth.

The people of Dwaraka were panic-stricken, for Krishna still had not returned from Indraprastha. Krishna's son Pradyumna consoled them. Quickly, he climbed into his own chariot to confront the enemy.

With him rode all the Yadava maharathikas – the great archers Satyaki, Charudeshna, Samba, Akrura and his brother Kritavarman, Bhanuvinda, Gada, Suka and Sarana. They rode, with weapons glinting and mail shining in the sun, each hero ringed by his force of guards. War elephants, horsemen and footsoldiers followed them.

Battle was joined between Salva and his army and the legions of Dwaraka – a battle no less than the one the Asuras and Devas fought of old. With devastras, weapons of light, flames and power, Pradyumna repelled the sorcerous ayudhas of Salva and the Saubha – as the rising sun does the darkness of night.

In the space of a blink, he struck Salva's senapati with twenty-five steel-tipped arrows with golden handles. He struck Salva in his flying disk with a hundred barbs, the commanders of Salva's legions with ten shafts each, each chariot with three, and every footsoldier of the enemy with a savage arrow.

The Yadava army exulted at the transcendent archery of Pradyumna; the enemy cried out their admiration. Yet, the Saubha, the flying disk, was another matter – at times, it appeared to be a score, a flotilla, of different craft, at others it was a single ship, then again it would be invisible.

The vimana that Mayaa made was beyond understanding. Never still for a moment, it flashed from earth to sky, from mountaintop to the sea, diving beneath turquoise waves. It flared above Dwaraka in dizzy circles as a ball of fire. It seemed beyond the scope of the elements.

Whenever and wherever the Yadava army sighted Salva and his fleeting craft, or his legions, the forces of Dwaraka covered them in arrow clouds. The astras and narachas of the Yadava warriors burned like fire and sun, they were as vicious as serpent venom.

Once, Salva swooned for the occult power of those incendiary shafts. Yet, he woke almost immediately and loosed a range of his own astras at the enemy. The Yadava heroes, Krishna's blood, who would have conquered Bhumi and Swarga if the Avatara did not restrain them constantly, stood firm and impervious to his every assault.

Dyuman was Salva's powerful senapati, the one whom Pradyumna first struck with twenty-five blazing shafts. Suddenly, with a savage yell, he rushed at Krishna's son – the incarnate Kama Deva – and felled him with a terrific blow to his chest with a mace of solid iron. Pradyumna sank to his knees, blood on his lips, and fainted. Quicker than thinking, his sarathy spirited him away from battle.

In moments, Pradyumna recovered and jumped up, his eyes wild with anger. He cried at his charioteer, 'Suta! What have you done? Never has any kshatriya in the line of Yadu fled a battle. You have made me the first coward of our royal house. You have made me break a warrior's dharma.'

Tears in his eyes, the young hero was beside himself. 'How will I face my fathers, Krishna and Rama? What will I say when they ask me why I fled from the field? My brothers' wives will laugh in my face, and call me coward. Suta, Suta, they will say to me, "Pradyumna, O great Kshatriya, tell us why you ran like a eunuch from battle?" '

His serene charioteer replied, 'My lord, may you live a long life! I have broken no dharma, least of all a sarathy's dharma. The first dharma of a sarathy is to protect the life of the master of the ratha.

My lord, if my life was in danger would you not protect me? I saw you flung down by the enemy's blow. You swooned and were easy prey for his shafts. When you were helpless and he could have killed you in an instant, it was my sacred dharma to bear you out of harm's way.' "

SALVA DIES

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "PRADYUMNA DID ACHAMANA, SIPPING HOLY water, put on fresh mail, picked up his bow, and said to his loyal sarathy, 'Ride, my friend, take me back to where the mighty Dyuman is fighting!'

The sarathy stormed back into the fray, and they saw Dyuman decimating the Yadava army. A serene, smiling Pradyumna loosed eight lightlike shafts at Salva's senapati. Four slew Dyuman's horses, another his charioteer, two more struck down his flagstaff and cracked the bow in his hands. The final arrow plucked Dyuman's head from his neck like a flower from its stem.

Roaring in triumph, Gada, Satyaki, Samba and the other Yadu heroes streamed forward and fell upon Salva's army in a tide of blood. Those that rode in the Saubha had their heads sloughed off, and their bodies toppled into the sea below. But quickly, Salva's warriors regrouped and fought back. For twenty-seven days, that pitched battle raged, and men in thousands perished on both sides – Yadavas and the soldiers of Salva alike. The four quarters echoed with the sounds of the encounter.

Meanwhile, Krishna, who had remained behind in Indraprastha after the Rajasuya yagna, saw evil omens everywhere. Fearing for Dwaraka, he quickly bade farewell to the Kuru elders of the city, to the Rishis and brahmanas, his Aunt Kunti Devi, Yudhishtira and his brothers, and Krishna flew back to the Sea City.

In his sacred heart, he knew that, with Balarama and himself away from Dwaraka, the dead Sishupala's allies had attacked the Yadava city amid the waves. Sure enough, he saw the Saubha flitting in the sky, and the damage Salva and his legions had done to Dwaraka.

Quickly giving Balarama charge of protecting the city, Krishna mounted his chariot, the Jaitra, and cried to his sarathy Daruka: 'Daruka fly at Salva! Not everything you see around the Saubha is real. He is a master mayavi and most of it is illusion.'

Relieved to hear this, Daruka flicked his reins over his magic steeds and they darted forward. The Yadava forces fighting outside Dwaraka saw the banner of Garuda flash in their direction; they heard the echoing blast of the Panchajanya, and great hope coursed through them.

Salva saw Krishna coming, and cast a lance like a bolt of lightning at Daruka. It flew at the Jaitra like a meteor, lighting up the sky, but in the twinkling of an eye, Krishna cut it in slivers with some supernatural archery.

In the space of a wish, he struck Salva with sixteen more arrows, then covered the great Saubha with a net of shafts, even as the sun does the earth with his rays. Salva struck back, finding Krishna's hand in which he held his bow, and a tremor of dismay rippled through the Yadava army when they saw the Saringa fall from Krishna's dark hand. They cried out in surprise for they had never seen such a thing happen before.

Laughing maniacally, Salva roared at Krishna, 'Fool, you snatched our friend Sishupala's wife from under our noses, and he was your cousin. I was not there to protect him at Yudhishtira's Rajasuya yagna, and you killed him treacherously. You brag that you are invincible in war, but today if you don't run from battle as you always do, I will send you to a world from where you will not come back!'

Krishna replied calmly, 'Witless, you drivel because you do not see death standing beside you. Real kshatriyas speak with actions and not empty boasts.'

Krishna flung his mace, the Kaumodaki, and struck Salva in his throat. Salva trembled like a leaf in a high wind, and vomited blood. The Kaumodaki flew back to Krishna, but Salva vanished from the sky in his subtle vimana.

Daruka brought the Jaitra down to the ground, beside the waving sea. Suddenly, a messenger came running to Krishna; he fell sobbing at the Avatara's feet and clasped his legs.

'Who are you?' asked the Avatara. 'Why are you crying?'

'Your mother Devaki Devi sent me, Lord. Krishna Mahabaho, Salva has bound your father Vasudeva and taken him away even as a butcher does a beast for slaughtering.'

Krishna heard this and swayed where he stood – shock and grief had their way with him as they might with any ordinary man. In that dread and despair, he cried, indeed like a common man, 'Oh, this is my fate! Otherwise, how could a worm like Salva take my father, when my brother Balarama guarded him?'

Tears springing into his eyes, out of love for Vasudeva, the Avatara sobbed, 'Oh, fate is inalienable, not even I can change what she has decreed!'

At that moment, Salva appeared before Krishna, hauling Vasudeva along by a rope round his neck.

The sorcerer king, who wore a long black robe, hissed, 'Here is your precious father, fool, dearer to you than your life. Watch what I do to him now, save him if you can.'

In a wink, Salva drew his sword and cut off Vasudeva's head in a crimson flash, and let the body fall onto the pale clean sand, upon which a stain of blood spread. Laughing demonically, with the severed head in his hand, he climbed back into the Saubha and flew up into the air.

Krishna's stricken roar made the waves of the ocean pause. He ran to the still spasming body of his father, to gather it in his arms. No sooner did he bend to touch it than it vanished, as did the stain of blood and the unknown messenger. For they had been illusions of Salva's sorcery, which he learnt from the Asura Mayaa.

Krishna shook his head, as if waking from a nightmare. Even he, the immaculate one, had been deceived because of the love he bore his father. Salva's mad laughter floated down from the sky.

The Sages that describe this strange event in truth describe the divine sport of the Lord. For how can Krishna, always illumined and absorbed in the Brahman, always Divine, be touched by human sorrow, caused by filial attachment? How could he have his moment of terror when he thought Salva had slain Vasudeva? How could he be deluded by the maya of the demon king?

The greatest Munis find the deepest secrets of the Atman by serving Krishna's lotus feet – the secret knowledge that extinguishes the ignorance of identifying the soul with the body. With that gyana they attain to eternal, infinite bliss.

How then can he, who is the very source of that ultimate light, peace and freedom, the final goal of all the Sages, be deluded for even a moment? Unless he willed it so!

Now, deciding to kill Salva, Krishna loosed a flurry of arrows at that kshatriya sorcerer, smashing his armour, cleaving the bow in Salva's hand, and plucking the crest jewel from his crown. Finally, he shattered the Saubha with the Kaumodaki, and it fell in shards into the ocean.

Using his occult powers, Salva leapt out of the broken craft and floated to the shore. Krishna flew down as well and, eyes blazing, frothing at the mouth, roaring like the demon he was, Salva rushed at him, mace in hand.

Calmly, Krishna invoked the astra called the bhalla and lopped away Salva's arms so blood spouted from the shoulders. Salva's shrieks shook beach and sea.

Krishna summoned the Sudarshana Chakra and it spun over his finger, a disk of untold brilliance. The Avatara looked like the Udaya Mountain, with the sun rising at its shoulder.

Even as Indra beheaded Vritrasura with his Vajra, once, Krishna took Salva's screaming head from its neck with his flaming disk. Its roaring stilled, it fell onto the sands, earrings and crown still sparkling in the last light of the day.

The Yadavas cried their triumph to the sky, and there on high the Devas beat their drums in peals of thunder to celebrate the destruction of the

Saubha – which might one day have threatened Devaloka – and the slaying of Salva the mayavi.

Another great demon born as a kshatriya on earth, and a friend of the dead Salva, now arrived to attack Krishna. Dantavakra of Kalinga came to avenge the death of all his friends that the Blue God had killed."

DANTAVAKRA MOKSHA

SRI SUKA SAID, "RAJAN, THE POWERFUL AND FELL DANTAVAKARA, ONE of the last kings of the old alliance of evil still left alive, thought he would avenge his friends that Krishna had slain – Sishupala, Salva and Paundraka.

As Krishna rode back into Dwaraka after killing Salva, he saw an enormous figure approaching him. Dantavakra strode toward the Avatara, shaking the ground with his tread, and he held a mace in his huge hands, while his eyes blazed in demented fury, and terrible growls came from his thick lips, from which crooked teeth protruded.

Krishna alighted from his chariot, also with his mace in his hand, and stopped the giant's advance as the shore does the sea.

Dantavakra raised his gada menacingly, and said, 'It is my good fortune that I have found you today, that you stand thus before me. You are my uncle's son, yet you hate your own blood. How many of our kin you have killed, Krishna, and I know you mean to kill me as well.

But today I will crush you with my mace, and you will see that it is like a thunderbolt. Ah fool, you are like a disease in my body – an enemy born as a relative – and I mean to avenge all my friends and kin that you have slain, vile one. Die, Krishna, die!'

After these words, sharp as a goad to an elephant, Dantavakra swung his mace down on the Blue One's head, truly like a thunderbolt. But the jewel of the House of Yadu stood unmoved, as if a flower had fallen on him.

Quicker than light, he struck Dantavakra back on his chest with the Kaumodaki. Krishna's mace shattered Dantavakra's armour, it tore through his ribs and his heart exploded. With a scream, Dantavakra fell dead, blood flowing from his mouth, his arms flung out and his hair wild.

Exactly as had happened with Sishupala, a pulsating light emerged from Dantavakra's corpse and blazed into Krishna's body. Vishnu's second dwarapalaka, Vijaya, was also redeemed from the curse of the Rishis of old. Earlier he had been born as Hiranyaksha and Kumbhakarna, and Vishnu killed him as the Varaha and as Rama of Ayodhya. Now, Krishna delivered him from this final demon birth.

Those who had gathered round saw that light and were amazed. But now, Dantavakra's brother Viduratha rushed roaring at Krishna, sword and shield in his hands, breathing hard in shock and rage. Krishna cut his head off, as he came, with the Sudarshana Chakra, sharper than a razor, and it fell on the ground, crown and earrings shimmering, sprayed with scarlet.

The good people of the world all sang Krishna's praises, as indeed did the Devas above, that Krishna had destroyed the Saubha and killed Salva, Dantavakra, and Viduratha. Munis, Gandharvas, Siddhas, Vidyadharas, great Sarpas, Apsaras, the Pitrs, Yakshas, Kinnaras, and Charanas hymned Krishna's triumph over the forces of evil.

The unearthly ones poured a rain of heaven's petals down over the victorious Avatara, as he rode back into his Sea City. Marvellous Dwaraka among the waves had been decked out with festive arches, and adorned brightly with garlands and lamps, to welcome Krishna back. He rode in through the lofty gates, surrounded by the Yadava heroes.

Thus, the ignorant and the deluded think of the Lord, master of yoga, sovereign of all the realms, as being sometimes vanquishable, while in truth he is invincible, and always victorious.

When Balarama heard that there would be war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, he decided he would have no part of it, and went away on a tirtha-yatra. He had taught both sets of cousins the art of mace fighting and Duryodhana had been his favourite pupil.

Balarama bathed at Prabhasa, worshipping the Devas, Rishis, and Pitrs and making offerings of food and gifts to men, he set out up the course of the Saraswati, accompanied by brahmanas.

Scion of the House of Bharata, he passed through the sacred tirthas Prithudaka, Bindursaras, Tritakupa, Sudarshana, Visala, Brahmatirtha, Chakratirtha, and all the other holy fords along the east-flowing Saraswati, the Ganga and the Yamuna. Finally, he arrived in the Naimisa vana, where Saunaka and the Rishis of the six great clans were performing a sattra, a prolonged sacrifice.

They recognised the divine Rama, rose to welcome him, and did not sit down while he stood. He took the padya and arghya they offered him, and sat down in a place of honour to which they showed him.

Rama saw the Suta Romaharshana, Vyasa's illustrious disciple, among the gathering of Sages. He saw that the Suta was the only Rishi who sat and never rose to greet him. Moreover, Romaharshana sat on a higher darbhasana than his own and did not so much as fold his hands to Krishna's brother.

In a moment, Balarama's face was red and his eyes blazed. He growled, 'This lowborn fellow, a suta, the son of a brahmana woman and a kshatriya man, sits in an exalted place! He shows no reverence for the Rishis or to me, though we are all protectors of dharma. He deserves to die.

He is not a fool or ignorant, that he behaves like this. He is the holy Vyasa's sishya. He has studied all the Itihasas, Puranas, and Dharmashastras – yet, it seems his learning has not taught him anything.

Why, Romaharshana is like an actor, who, if he has not learnt to master his senses, hardly acquires, himself, any of the qualities of all the heroes whose roles he plays. All the learning in the world does no good to the man without self-control and humility. He merely uses his knowledge as an instrument of power and egotism.

I have been born to punish any man that breaks dharma. Hypocrites, who pretend to be Dharmatmas, deserve killing. They sin doubly, for they not only violate dharma themselves they encourage others to do so. Let this wretch die!'

Balarama was abroad on a pilgrimage and had eschewed violence and chastisement for that time. But now he pulled up a blade of kusa grass, and turning it into an astra, he struck the Suta down with it.

The other Munis cried out in dismay. 'Hah! What have you done, Lord? You have sinned.'

'How so?'

'O Joy of the Yadavas, we ourselves gave Romaharshana the exalted seat, which is due to a brahmana when he relates a sacred legend or any scripture during a sattra. As long as he is engaged in expounding the Shastra, he may not leave his place or greet anyone, whoever he may be. Before the sattra began, we Rishis assured him that he would come to no harm as long as he was our Pauranika.

Though you did not realise what you did, Lord, you have committed the most heinous sin of all – that of Brahmahatya, killing a bramana and a great Sage. Probably, even this terrible crime will not affect you, for you are the master of all Yogins and transcend even the law of the Veda. Yet, must you not set an example for the world by yourself observing dharma strictly?

O Sanctifier of this Earth, if it pleases you, you must perform expiation for this slaying of a brahmana. That would serve the world well; else, others will follow your example and horrible crimes will be committed everywhere.'

Without hesitating, Balarama said, 'I will perform expiation, and let it be the sternest punishment. Also, with my Yogamaya, I will restore the Suta to life, and bless him with a long life, special siddhis, of the senses and the mind, and do whatever else you decide I should.'

The Rishis of the Naimisa, Saunaka and the others, replied, 'Do as you like, Lord Balarama. But for us do two things – preserve your reputation as an infallible one and that of the irrevocable potency of your weapons. But, also, enable us to keep our word to the Suta, that he would have our protection while he was our Pauranika, and complete his narration of the Purana during our sattra.'

Balarama reflected for a moment, then said, 'The Veda says that a man's own self is born as his son. So, Romaharshana's son Ugrasravas shall be your Pauranika, and complete what his father began at your sattra. Ugrasravas shall have a long life, and great powers of body and mind.

Munis, tell me what else you want from me, and you shall have it. I beg you, wise ones, tell me how I can purify myself of the sin of slaying Romaharshana. I did not do this thing knowingly, yet as you say I must perform expiation or the world will follow my example.'

The Rishis said, 'There is something you can do for us, which will help us complete our sattra, which is for the weal of the world. The savage Danava Balvala is the son of Ilvala, the terrible.

Every parva, each day of the full and the new moons, he comes here and desecrates our sacrifice with showers of pus and blood, faeces, urine, raw liquor and putrid flesh. If you kill Balvala, you will do us the greatest service and further the sacred cause we are engaged in, O scion of Dasarha.

When you have slain the demon, continue your tirtha yatra for twelve months. Range the length and breadth of Bharatavarsha, bathe in all her holy rivers and streams, and you will find absolution from your sin.'

Thus said Saunaka and his Rishis to Balarama."

THE KILLING OF BALVALA AND BALARAMA'S TIRTHA YATRA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "BALARAMA REMAINED WITH THE RISHIS UNTIL the day of the next full moon. Suddenly, an unnatural storm blew in the Naimisa vana. Spinning clouds of dust enveloped the forest, and with these came an indescribably foul stink.

A rain of liquid excrement fell over the yagnashala, and in another moment, the Rakshasa Balvala arrived, airborne, trisula in hand. He was tall as trees, and enormous. His body was a dazzling blue, like the inside of a mount of antimony. His hair and beard were the colour of molten copper; he had great shaggy, curving eyebrows, and long fangs jutting out over pendulous lips.

Balarama took one look at Balvala, and he thought of his halayudha, his ploughshare weapon. In a flash, the halayudha appeared in Balarama's hand and he plucked the rakshasa from the air like a bird. Quicker than thinking, Rama struck the startled rakshasa on the head with his hala.

Balvala's skull cracked like thunder, blood and brain spouted from the rupture and the demon, who had harassed the Rishis of the Naimisa for so long, gave a chilling howl and died. He lay there like a mountain cleft by a cosmic thunderbolt.

The Rishis crowded gratefully around Balarama. They showered praises and blessings over him. They poured holy water over him in a ceremonial ablutionary consecration, just as the Devas did Indra when he slew Vritrasura.

Saunaka's Munis draped an unfading vaijayanti of five colours, a garland made mainly from unearthly lotuses, round Balarama's neck, and they presented him with a set of electric blue garments, also not of this world. They gave him ornaments such as the Devas wear.

Later, taking the Rishis' leave, Balarama continued on his pilgrimage. He went next to the river Kausiki, bathed in its crisp water, then continued to the sacred lake that is the source of the Sarayu.

Having bathed in that spring, Rama now traced the course of the Sarayu and arrived at Prayaga, the holiest of all confluences, where he bathed in the Ganga. With his brahmanas, he performed the rituals there that propitiate the Devas and all other beings, then went on toward the Maharishi Pulaha's asrama, in the place called Harikshetra.

Rama bathed in the rivers Gomati, Gandaki, and the Vipasa, and then arrived in Gaya, where he worshipped the Pitrs, the spirits of the manes. He bathed in the place where the Ganga flows into the ocean, and performed more solemn and ancient rituals there – rites of purification.

Now he set out for Mount Mandara, where he went to Parasurama Bhargava's asrama and, prostrating before that Avatara, took his blessings. Leaving Mandara, he bathed at Saptagodavari, where the Godavari splits herself into seven streams. Continuing his yatra, he bathed in the Vena, the peerless Pampasaras, and the Bhimarathi.

He went on to the temple of Skanda, where he worshipped Siva's son, and went on to Srisaila, were the Lord Siva is said to dwell. From here, Balarama walked to all the places said to be the most sacred in the Dravida lands – Mount Venkatadari, Kamakoshni, or Kamakoti, in the city of Kanchi, Kanchipuram, to that holiest river, the Kaveri, and on to Srirangam, where the Lord Hari abides in a most special manifestation.

Balarama now crossed Mount Rishabha, dear and sacred to Vishnu, and arrived at the ocean in the south east of Bharatavarsha, where he saw the Nalasetu, which was built for Sri Rama of Ayodhya to cross into Lanka. Those that worship here are absolved of the direst sins.

At Setu, Balarama gifted ten thousand cows to brahmanas. On he went to the rivers Kritamala and Tamraparni, and from there to the Malaya Mountain, which is considered one of the seven great ranges of the country.

Upon the Malaya, he found the Rishi Agastya performing tapasya, worshipped that Muni, and received his blessings. Now he arrived at the southernmost tip of the Holy Land, and prayed at the temple of Durga called Kanyakumari.

Journeying on, Balarama came to Phalguna, better known as Anantapuram, or Tiruvanantapuram, where Narayana appeared as Padmanabha. Balarama bathed in the Panchapsaras, also called Padmatirtha, the sacred pool that faces the Padmanabha kshetra. Here, also, he gave away ten thousand cows to the brahmanas of the auspicious shrine.

He travelled through Kerala and the Trigartha country, and came to Gokarna, which is sacred to the Lord Parameshwara and where Dhurjati, Siva, is always present. Continuing his pilgrimage, he worshipped Durga of the Island.

Never stopping long in any place, Balarama came to Surparaka, where he bathed in the blessed waters of the Tapi, the Payoshi and the Nirvindhya, then arrived at the Dandaka vana.

He went on to the river Reva, upon whose banks the city Mahishmati stands. He bathed at Manutirtha, and arrived once more at Prabhasa, from where he had first set out. At Prabhasa, he heard from the brahmanas there that the Mahabharata yuddha between the Pandavas and the Kauravas was almost over, and millions of powerful and arrogant kshatriyas of the Earth had been slain.

Why, Bhumi Devi, they told him, was rid of her burden of evil – for which purpose Krishna had taken birth.

Balarama set out straightaway for Kurukshetra. He had prescience of the gada yuddha that Bheema and Duryodhana would fight, and with the war over, he wanted to stop them, both his pupils. For, if they fought on, one of them would surely die.

There, Yudhishtira, Krishna, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva received him with homage, then stood silent, wanting to know his mind. Already, Duryodhana and Bheema fought savagely, each blow of their maces a thunderclap. They weaved and wheeled, spun and ducked, and swung out murderously at each other.

Balarama cried to them, 'Duryodhana Raja! Bheemasena! You are both my sishyas, and I say to you today that you are both equals. Bheema is stronger than Duryodhana but Duryodhana makes up for that by being Bheema's superior in speed and training.

Being so equally matched, neither of you will prevail. The war is over and there is nothing to gain from this foolish contention. I tell you, stop!'

But, O Parikshit, the antagonists hardly seemed to hear him, for the minds of both were awash upon a bitter tide of insults and offences remembered. With hatred and rage for the other ruling both mace warriors, they fought on, disregarding their master's command.

Balarama knew it was some inexorable karma from past lives that made these two magnificent kshatriyas such enemies in this one. Sadly, he turned away from the awesome and vicious duel. The great Yadava turned home to Dwaraka, where King Ugrasena received him joyfully, as did his other kinsmen.

Balarama was an Avatara of Yagna, of sacrifice, and he now took himself to the Naimisa vana again. Having forsaken violence, in all its forms, Rama performed myriad sacrifices in the company of the holy Sages of that forest.

During these, he blessed them with the highest illumination of the spirit. They saw the universe founded in the Atman, which pervaded all things.

When the sattra was over, Balarama took the avabhrita snana, put on fresh silks and ornaments. Surrounded by their kinsmen, Rama and his wife Revathi seemed like the moon on purnima night, shining with its own lustre.

Countless are the great deeds of the mighty Balarama, of untold prowess, glory without end, who was Adisesha born as a man. Let anyone reflect upon the deeds of the mighty Yadava, Avatara of the infinite rest of Vishnu, during the morning and evening sandhyas, and he or she shall be close indeed to the heart of the Lord Narayana."

THE TALE OF SRIDAMA

PARIKSHIT SAID, "GREAT, MOST REVERED MASTER, TELL ME MORE ABOUT the divine deeds of the Lord Mukunda, the Paramatman, in whom all the glories dwell.

Maharishi, which man of sense, dejected after the long and vain pursuit of pleasure, would ever be sated with hearing the Purana of the Lord, repeatedly, once he is initiated into the sacred lore?

Why, the only true speech is that which sings the Lord's praises and describes his Avataras. The only real hand is the one that serves the Lord, as the wise and enlightened mind is aware of the Lord abiding everywhere. So, too, O Suka Deva, the only ear that hears is the one that listens to the legends of Narayana.

A man is said to possess a head only when he bows his head to creation, to the living and the apparently lifeless, as parts of God. One has eyes only if they behold the Living Presence. One has a body only if it is soaked in waters that have washed the feet of the Lord, or the feet of his great bhaktas."

Suka heard the fervour in Parikshit, the Vishnubhakta's, voice. His own mind absorbed in Vasudeva, Suka – the son of Badarayana, the incomparable Muni Vyasa – resumed his *Bhagavata Purana*.

"Krishna had a precious friend. He was a most learned brahmana, a master of the Veda, full of renunciation, always serene, and blessed with restraint and mastery over his senses and passions. He was a grihasta, eking out his living with whatever fate brought him.

This brahmana was called Kuchela, for, being impoverished, he owned only rather soiled clothes. His real name was Sridama. His wife, too, went about exactly as her husband did – emaciated for want of sufficient food, and poorly clad. She was called Kshutkshaama for her starved appearance and her fine face like a faded flower, for they were terribly poor.

One day, his chaste and devoted wife said to Kuchela, 'Swami, Krishna, Lord of the Sattvatas, consort of Sri Lakshmi, Devi of fortune and prosperity, is meant to be your friend. They say he loves all brahmanas and gives them sanctuary and anything that they need.

My lord, why don't you go to see him, and I am sure he will give you all the wealth we need to end this misery that we live in. Krishna is now virtual sovereign of the Bhojas, the Andhakas and the Vrishnis, and he lives in Dwaraka.

I have heard that he is the Master of the universe, and that he would give his very life to those that love him. Surely, he will give a bhakta and friend like you more than enough riches for us to live,' she paused, a little hesitant, 'though, finally, that might not be what we should be after. I am tired of living like this, and I beg you, go to Krishna and ask for his help.'

At first, Kuchela baulked at the thought of going to Krishna for material help. But his wife implored him, repeatedly, and finally he agreed to go to Dwaraka. In his heart, the real reason why he gave in was the thought of seeing his precious Krishna again.

Kuchela said to his wife, 'I must take a gift for Krishna, my dear, whatever you can find in the house.'

She gave him four hands of aval, puffed rice, which she begged as alms from the brahmanas who were their neighbours. She made a bundle of the aval in a piece of cloth and gave it to her husband.

Bundle tucked into his waist, his heart alight at the thought of seeing Krishna, holy Kuchela set out for Dwaraka in the sea. His journey seemed brief for he was absorbed in that one thought.

Arriving at the perimeter of Krishna's city, Kuchela found himself in the company of some other Rishis and brahmanas, also come to see the Avatara. Together, they passed through three military checkpoints at three successive gates and came into the impregnable city of the Andhakas and Vrishnis, all bhaktas and followers of Krishna.

Kuchela parted ways with the other brahmanas, and walked on alone, lost in a dream of Krishna, and he came to the precinct of sixteen thousand mansions that housed the wives of the Blue God. Looking around him, in slight bewilderment, the brahmana walked into the palace that appeared the most splendid to him.

At once, a tide of bliss surged through him, body and soul – the rapture of the Brahman! Through a window, Krishna saw his old friend from Guru Sandipani's asrama, jumped up from his consort's bed and ran out to greet Sridama.

Krishna took the tired brahmana in his arms and clasped him as if Kuchela were his very life. Kuchela wept, speechless. Krishna wept, too, tears streaming from his lotus eyes, for joy to see his old friend.

He brought the brahmana into his mansion and made him sit upon his bed. Krishna washed Kuchela's feet; then, he, Lord of the universe, the Sacred One who sanctifies the world, sprinkled that water over his own head!

Krishna offered Kuchela arghya and other precious gifts. He smeared the brahmana's emaciated body with fragrant sandalwood paste and other rare anointments. He worshipped Sridama by waving butter lamps before him, and sticks of incense. He gifted a cow to Kuchela and gave him piquant betel leaves to chew.

A fair torrent of the sweetest words of welcome flowed from the lips of the Avatara. Rukmini, whose palace that was, who is Lakshmi Devi herself, fanned the unwashed, bedraggled brahmana, wearing tattered rags, his veins standing like slim blue snakes all over his starved body.

The servants and maids in that palace were astonished to see how great Krishna adored the filthy, beggarly brahmana. They whispered among themselves about the awesome punya he must have done to earn this worship from the God of gods.

Certainly, the fellow was a beggar, starving and penniless. The world would shun him, but Krishna, Lord of the three realms, and the living abode of Sri, welcomed him like an elder brother, with such delight. Why, Krishna had leapt out of his lovely queen's bed to rush out to receive the unkempt stranger.

Rajan, Krishna and Kuchela sat so lovingly together, hand in hand, and what a time they had reminiscing about the grand old days when they were students together in their Guru Sandipani's asrama.

Then, with a twinkle in his eye, Krishna said, 'Most learned Sridama, master of the Vedas and the Shastras, tell me, after you left our gurukula did you become a grihasta? Have you married, my friend? But look at you, as pure as ever. The world has not touched your mind with its fingers of corruption!

I look at you and feel so proud that, O my wise Sridama, you do not care a whit for wealth. Yes, I am so pleased to see that there still remain some that work in this world without desire for profit. Who are beyond Prakriti's natural selfishness.

Ah my friend, how wonderful were our days in Guru Sandipani's asrama, and so carefree. That was the time when we learnt the Veda and its wisdom, by which the sishya passes beyond the darkness of samsara.

The father, through whom one is born into this world, is a man's first Guru. The second Guru is the one that invests the twice-born with the sacred thread, after which the sishya is permitted to study the Veda.'

Krishna smiled, 'Of course, then there is the third and final Guru, who enlightens all the varnas, indeed all beings, directly. That teacher is one with me; why, he is me. The wise seek sanctuary in the third Guru, O Brahmana.

The man that hears the Sanatana Dharma from me, in this world, easily crosses the sea of samsara. Among those that live by the ancient dharma of the four varnas, and the four asramas of life, these are the truly intelligent ones. They find the final beatitude.

I dwell in every being, and am the inner controller of karma and destiny. Yet, not the performance of great yagna, not upanayanam, the investiture of the sacred thread, or the brahmacharya it implies, not even the sternest tapasya of the vanaprasthas, or even Sannyasa, pleases me as much as the service of the Guru.

Most blessed Brahmana, let me remind you of what happened one day in our Guru's asrama. Our master's wife sent us both into the forest to gather firewood for the asrama fires.

We had barely entered the jungle when, suddenly, the most violent and unseasonable storm broke out. Thunder and lightning rent the sky and torrential rain lashed the world, like the very Pralaya, while a furious wind howled around us.

Just then, the sun also set and we were plunged not only in the storm but in darkness, as well. Quickly the water rose in a small flood around our legs, and we could not distinguish high ground from low, or even from uneven.

We clasped each other's hands, do you remember Sridama, and roamed lost through the frightening forest. We did not know where we were or where we went. Blindly, we stumbled along, drenched to the bone, and the wind unremitting. Thus we tottered along.

It was then that Guru Sandipani realised that we were out in the forest in the storm, and he came to look for us. With his power, he soon found us, even in the pitch darkness, and we were a pathetic spectacle!

Tears in his kind eyes, he said, "Oh, precious children, how you have suffered for our sakes! All creatures treasure their lives above everything else in the world, but you set your very lives at naught to come out here in search of firewood.

There is no gurudakshina that can match this dakshina, of your very bodies, by which men achieve all else while they live. O greatest among the twice-born, I am pleased with you, I am more pleased with you than I can tell! I bless you – may the Veda that you have studied with me prove to be richly fruitful for you during your journey through this world, and in the next one too! May its wisdom never fade in your spirits."

Ah my sweet friend, do you remember that day when we were disciples in our master's asrama? And it was not the only extraordinary happening in our lives at the time, far from it. Can you remember all the others? Truly,

truly, our Guru's blessing has never faded from our spirits. Only with his Guru's grace does a man succeed in his life – satisfy his material desires and then find the peace of his soul within.'

But Sridama said in soft protest, 'Devadeva, Jagadguru, what other success or fulfilment is there for me, who was fortunate enough to spend the days of my youth with you, Krishna, in Guru Sandipani's asrama. You are the final teacher, and your wishes and thoughts always come to pass.

Pervasive One, for you whose very body is the holy Veda, your time spent in the Guru's asrama was hardly more than conforming with the ways of this world!' "

GRACE

SRI SUKA WENT ON, "KRISHNA, WHO KNOWS THE HEARTS OF ALL MEN, for he dwells in everyone, smiled indulgently at Sridama. Then, a gleam in his eye, that enducer to the life of the spirit, the goal of all Sages, suddenly asked, 'Brahmana, tell me, what have you brought for me from home?

Anything a bhakta offers me, the merest trifle, I think of as being great and wonderful, if it is offered with love. But however magnificent or priceless the offering, it is worth nothing if there is no devotion in the heart that offers it.

Yes, truly, my friend, let a man offer me a flower, fruit, or just some water, but with love in his heart, and I shall accept his gift with joy! So tell me, Sridama, what did you bring for me from home?'

The brahmana looked away from Krishna; he looked shyly down at his feet, but he did not offer the puffed rice his wife had sent, in the bundle tucked away in his waist. How could he give such a mean gift to the Lord, in whom the Devi Sri abides?

Knowing his friend's heart, Krishna knew why Sridama had come to Dwaraka. He knew that the brahmana would never have come to ask him for any favour or wealth. The Avatara knew that his wife had sent Kuchela to the Sea City. Krishna decided he would indeed give Sridama, the humble, wealth – he would give him wealth beyond his dreams, wealth that even the Devas would envy.

Leaning forward, in a flash, Krishna wrested the bundle of aval from the brahmana's waist.

'What is this then?'

He undid the knot on the dirty looking little bundle. Then he cried, 'Aval! Ah, my friend, you did not forget how much I love this rice. Nothing in all the worlds could make me happier than this gift you have brought for me!'

With that, Krishna scooped up one handful of the puffed rice and ate it with relish. He reached for the second handful, when Rukmini seized his hand, took it to her own mouth, and ate all the rest of the aval herself.

Her chest heaving a little, she whispered to Krishna, 'You gave him everything he could want in this world and the next, when you ate the first handful. That will do, my Lord!'

Krishna laughed, for he knew as well that, had he eaten the second handful, Rukmini herself, the Devi Lakshmi, would have become the Brahmana Sridama's handmaiden, a servant in his house!

Nibbling on the choicest delicacies, feeling as if he was in heaven for being with Krishna, perfectly blissful, Sridama spent that night in Dwaraka under the Avatara's roof. Into the small hours, Krishna and he sat chatting, absorbed in each other's company.

The next morning, though, Kuchela said he must return home, because his wife would be waiting for him. Krishna saw him off, coming out of his city to do so, and going a good way with the brahmana. Finally, embracing the dear friend of his youth, with tears in his eyes, Krishna allowed him to leave. For a long time, he stood waving after Sridama, then wiping his eyes, turned back into Dwaraka.

As Sridama, or Sudama, as he is also known, went along, he realised that he had quite forgotten to ask Krishna for what he had come – the means to support his wife and himself. Neither had Krishna asked if he could help him, despite seeing him clad in rags and obviously impoverished and starving.

A pang of shame touched the noble brahmana's heart that he had come to see Krishna for such a base reason. But then he thought of the time he had spent with the Blue One, and again joy rose within him.

Sudama thought, 'Today I have seen how great Krishna is! I was anxious that he might have forgotten me, but he clasped me to him as if I was his elder brother. He did not care that my clothes were filthy, or that I am the poorest of the poor.

Why, not just poor, but a sinner, too, and quite degenerate – that I went to him in quest of riches. Just because I wear holy ashes and the thread of a brahmana, he clasped me in his arms with love – he in whom the Devi Sri dwells!

Yes, like his brother he made me rest on his own bed, where he lies with his queen! The Devi Rukmini fanned me with her chowry. Krishna washed my feet and sprinkled the water on his head. He rubbed sandalwood paste into my skin, and gave me wonderful food and drink. He, the Devadeva, the Brahmanyadeva, showed me such reverence and honour.'

He paused in his reverie of Krishna, then murmured to himself, 'How wise Krishna is. Serving the feet of the Lord is the only way to achieve one's ends – whether a man is after Swarga or Moksha, or if he wants wealth in Rasatala or this world.

Krishna never gave me any gold or riches. How wise he is. He who knows all things knows that wealth makes the poor man vain and arrogant, to the point that he forgets his real purpose and his only true happiness – to live in the constant memory of God.

He knew that I would have been ruined in my spirit if he suddenly made me a wealthy man. Truly, truly, how wise my Krishna is.'

Sudama arrived in the small town where he lived in a little hut of one room. He arrived home, and his mouth fell open when he saw the mansions that stood where his kutila had once been. Not one but many palatial edifices stood before the incredulous brahmana – their towers shone like the sun, moon, and fire.

Kuchela the brahmana stood gaping at the spectacle before him – sprawling gardens and parks, full of trees and private woods; pools and lakes, upon which water birds, swan, ibis, pelican, goose and teal swam. These were laden with the rarest lotuses in deep blue, resonant scarlet, kalharas and delicate lilies.

The poor brahmana saw a host of powerful and elegant servitors and guardsmen, and a bevy of beautiful maids moving in and around the central mansion, which was no less magnificent than Rukmini's palace in Dwaraka where he had spent the previous night.

In a daze, Sudama wondered, 'This is not my home, but then what place is this? Whose house?'

Just then, he heard wonderful music and a group of people, radiant as Apsaras and Gandharvas, came out to meet him, singing and dancing. Among them, he saw his wife! But now she wore finery and jewels that could not be of this world. Moreover, she too was an unworldly beauty, coming to receive her lord even like the Devi Sri from her palace of lotuses. Countless sakhis, bejewelled, wearing the richest silks, attended her, as if she was a queen of queens.

She stood wordlessly before him, overwhelmed, a smile lighting her face and tears flowing down her cheeks, for sheer undiluted joy. Her eyes were so full of the excitement of love! She shut her eyes then, and in her mind, she prostrated before her husband, who stood before her, bemused, still wearing rags. In her heart, she embraced him wildly.

Taking his hand shyly, that chaste and devoted woman led him into their new home of marvels. He gazed at her in wonder – she was an Apsara-like beauty.

As in a dream, indeed, he walked into his new home. It was like Indra's palace in Devaloka, and hundred of columns encrusted with precious gemstones supported that mansion.

Inside, he found great white beds, soft as milk foam. The bedstead and posts were made of ivory, chased with gold. The fans and chowries that lay upon these beds had golden handles.

Golden were the thrones, chairs and settees, with the softest cushions. Luminous pearl strings hung from various canopies. His eyes glued open, Sudama unwinkingly stared at the amazing crystal walls of his palace. He saw the great emeralds that studded these, and the exquisitely crafted figurines, carved out of chunks of precious stone and holding jewelled butter lamps in their hands. The light from these lamps illumined the rooms.

Seeing the heavenly opulence around him, Sudama wondered how this miracle had happened – only momentarily, for he quickly understood the only possible cause for the transformation of his life.

'I was born into dire poverty and have always lived in poverty. There can only be one cause for this incredible, undeserved change – Krishna! It is my visit to him and nothing else that is responsible for this miracle.

He is God, the lord of all wealth, that master of the Dasarhas, my friend Krishna. He is infinitely generous. Look at what he has blessed me with! Yet, I know he would consider it a trifle. Ah, he showers his grace upon his bhaktas as Indra does the rains, plentifully, but thinks nothing of it. Neither does he announce his intentions.

Ah, how much he gives, as if it were nothing. Yet, the smallest gift that he receives from a bhakta, the poorest, most paltry thing, he considers precious past reckoning. How avidly he ate the wretched flakes of rice that I took for him – as if it were amrita!'

The brahmana, his heart full, sighed, and said aloud, 'All this wealth counts for little, except for he that gave it to me – may I be blessed with Krishna's friendship and devotion for him in my every birth and life! May I always adore and serve him. May I be blessed with the friendship of his bhaktas.'

Sudama fell to deeper thought, and murmured in some anxiety, 'Often, his bhaktas have small understanding of their own final interest or wellbeing. But he, who knows all things, does not give them a surfeit of wealth, power – material or spiritual – or confer great authority upon them.

He knows that they will fall prey to vanity and arrogance, which can only impede their ultimate cause, even cause them to fall spiritually. He saves the gift of wealth for the unevolved.'

He was truly worried now. 'Ah, all this wealth will be a danger to me, and I must be careful never to become attached to it.'

And so, Kuchela, wisest of brahmanas, greatest of Krishnabhaktas, never did allow himself to indulge excessively in the wealth Krishna conferred on him, and most of all, never to grow attached to it. But he did enjoy what his friend and Lord gave him, in the company of his loving wife – mostly, to please her, and always in a spirit of renunciation. While, in his heart of hearts, he always wanted nothing more than to renounce the material life completely and be united in spirit with God.

Thus, brahmanas are, truly, precious to the Lord Hari, God of gods, Lord of sacrifices, Master of creation. He adores them, worships them; to him, there is nothing higher than a good brahmana.

As for Sudama, this is the story of how he realised that the invincible Krishna is easily conquered by his bhaktas, with love and devotion. More than when he was poor, Sudama now meditated upon the Lord, indeed he did so constantly, though he lived in the midst of untold wealth.

Swiftly, the last knots of bondage in his heart dissolved in that dhyana and he attained Mahavishnu's realm, Vaikuntha, which is the highest objective of all men of dharma. Rajan, those that listen with faith to the incomparable tale of the impoverished brahmana, Kuchela, and how Krishna blessed him beyond his dreams, they will surely find true bhakti and freedom from the bonds of karma."

FESTIVAL AT SAMANTAPANCHAKA

SRI SUKA SAID, “ONCE, WHILE RAMA AND KRISHNA WERE IN DWARAKA, there was a total eclipse of the sun, a day like night, as during the Pralaya, when the Kalpa ends.

The astronomers told the people about the event, before it occurred, and they went in droves to sacred Samantapanchaka, near Kurukshetra – to bathe in those holy waters and perform profound rituals during the day of the eclipse.

Long ago, at Samantapanchaka, Parasurama Bhargava made five lakes with the blood of the kshatriyas he slew – in the days when he swore to rid the Earth of the very race of warriors, because one of them killed his father Jamadagni.

Though he was an Avatara, and beyond the effects of karma, yet, to set an example for the world, Parasurama did a long and stern expiation at Samantapanchaka for his sin of slaughtering countless kshatriyas. He performed that expiation as if he was an ordinary man.

To that place, made sacred an age ago by Parasurama Bhargava, people from across the length and breadth of Bharatavarsha came flocking. Among them, were great Yadavas – Akrura, Vasudeva, Ugrasena, Gada, Pradyumna and Samba came, as did many others, leaving Aniruddha, Kritavarman, Succhandra, Suka and Sarana to protect Dwaraka.

The way to Samantapanchaka was colourful with these brilliant heroes, wearing golden necklaces, garlands of flowers, silken garments, armour. Like a magic river, they went to wash their sins in the sacred waters.

They rode in gilded chariots, with cavalry like ocean waves surging round them, war-elephants trumpeting like thunderheads, and legions of footsoldiers, bright as Vidyadharas! Richly clad and adorned with priceless ornaments, their wives travelled in palanquins beside the majestic kshatriyas.

At the sacred tirtha, the Yadavas bathed ritually, and offered solemn prayers, with their minds concentrated in dhyana. They kept a rigorous fast all the while. They distributed gifts to deserving brahmanas – cows by the herd, all decked in golden chains, garlands and rich cloths.

Again, the Yadavas bathed in the water that Parasurama had sanctified; they prayed fervently that they might always be blessed with unwavering bhakti for Krishna.

Now they fed the brahmanas who went with them and those they found at the tirtha with the finest delicacies. Later, after asking the holy men's permission, they ate themselves, breaking their fast.

When they had eaten, they lolled in the shade of the great trees that grew on the banks of the five shimmering lakes. They met other kshatriyas, Maharishis, and their own kinsmen from distant lands, who had also come to bathe at Samantapanchaka this auspicious day.

The Yadavas encountered many kings here, friends, and enemies too! Among others, they greeted the rulers of Matsya, Usinara, Kosala, Vidarbha, Kaurava, Srinjaya, Kambhoja, Kekaya, Madra, Anarta, and Kerala. All these were among the most ancient royal bloodlines of Bharatavarsha.

But then, there were others at Samantapanchaka, even dearer to Krishna – Nanda, his gopas, and the gopis had come for the ritual ablution during the day of the eclipse. How long they had pined for him and now they saw Krishna before them, unexpectedly, and their hearts and faces lit up, they bloomed as lotuses do on the night of the full moon.

Krishna ran to them and they embraced, tears flowing down their faces, their voices choking, and the gopis trembling in abandon and excitement!

Then Krishna's wives met the gopis, with some awkwardness at first. Then they exchanged frank and intimate smiles, as those that share a great and wonderful secret, and quickly they were hugging each other fondly, with breasts, smeared with saffron dust, pressing against other breasts, tightly!

The women shed tears, finally to meet. The younger women of Vrindavana and those of Dwaraka sought the blessings of their elders, and then fell avidly to exchanging gossip and stories about...who else, but Krishna!

The mother of the Pandavas, Kunti Devi, was there, and after years, she saw her brothers, sisters, their children, and the rest of her family – with Krishna shining among them, blue and divine, the soul of them all. In a moment, she forgot the daily sorrow she was steeped in, and began chatting away with her kin, excitedly as a small girl.

But after the initial rush of delight, she spoke sadly to her brother Vasudeva.

'O Jyeshta, my elder brother, I am the most unfortunate of women. All of you, my kinsmen, are mighty kshatriyas, yet you haven't a thought to spare for me, when I live in the midst of mortal danger.

Truly do they say that those that fate does not favour are forgotten by their nearest and dearest ones, even relatives, sons and brothers, why, parents, too.'

Sadly Vasudeva replied, 'Ah, dear Kunti, we are all playthings in God's hands, toys and puppets. The very world works by his will, and only that. When Kamsa was king, he persecuted the Yadavas so that our people had to flee our home in Mathura and wander the face of the Earth like beggars.

When his time came, he died, and providence restored our home to us, and we had back everything we lost. Why all this happens, fortune and misfortune, joy and woe, when it does, inexorably, only God knows. You must keep strength and patience; no harm will come to you.'

The Yadava greeted all the other kings that had come to Samantapanchaka to worship, and when those kshatriyas met Krishna, they felt such inexplicable bliss.

Bheeshma, Drona, Gandhari, Dhritarashtra, all their sons, the Pandavas and their wives, Kunti, Srinjaya, Vidura, Kripa, Kuntibhoja, Virata, Bhishmaka, Nagnajit, Purujit, Drupada, Shalya, Dhrishtaketu, Kasiraja, Damaghosha, Janaka, Madraka, Krikaya, Yudhamanyu, Susharma, Baahlika, their sons, and other kings who were Yudhishtira's allies – all these saw the Avatara, a mystic blue lotus before them, among his wives.

They gazed upon him, the embodiment of beauty and grace, and could not tear their eyes away. Never had they seen anyone like him.

Balarama and Krishna came smiling among them, and received them affectionately. The kings praised the Vrishnis that Krishna was with them, as their support.

They said, 'Lord of the Bhojas, you and your people are certainly the most fortunate race on Earth. For he whom the Yogis all seek fervently but find it so hard to see, lives among you. You see him day after day!

He is the One whose fame is sung in the Vedas, whose very name purifies the universe. The Ganga flows from his feet, the Shastras from his mouth – both cleanse the world.

Time forever consumes this Bhumi, but the touch of Krishna's lotus feet revives her and she blesses us with everything we desire.

The life of the grihasta is the path to hell. Yet, the Lord Vishnu dwells in your grihas, your homes, as Krishna. He can bestow Swarga upon you, even Moksha, or better, indifference to both these!

You see him every day, touch him, journey with him, speak with, sleep with him, sit with him, eat with him – you are the chosen people. You lead your lives as householders, but with Krishna beside you. You perform your rites with him.

You are the most blessed race, for you have realised the ultimate purpose of existence.'

Nanda heard that Krishna had come to Samantapanchaka with the Yadavas, and he came to meet his foster-son. He came with his gopas, bringing many fine gifts in their gypsy carts.

When the Yadavas saw Nanda, whom they longed to meet, they sprang up from where they sat and ran to embrace him; why, they were like wilted bodies to which the prana returns.

Vasudeva clasped the gopa chieftain warmly, in utter joy. Emotionally, he reminisced with his old friend about Kamsa, the birth of Krishna, and how he, Vasudeva, had given the infant saviour into the care of Nanda, on a squally fearsome night.

Noblest of Kurus, Balarama and Krishna embraced their foster parents, and, overcome, stood unable to say anything, for their voices choked, and tears of joy streamed down their faces. Such love overcame the two incarnations.

As for Nanda and Yasodha, they set their sons upon their laps, as if they were babies again, clasped them tightly in their arms, and felt they were in heaven – the sorrow of all the years of being parted from Rama and Krishna fell away from them.

Now Rohini and Devaki, the natural mothers of Rama and Krishna, came forward to clasp Yasodha, queen of Vraja, and they wept to think of how she had raised their sons – with such love, perhaps more than they themselves could have given.

They said to her, 'Vrajeshwari, not all the wealth of Indra can begin to reward you for everything that you did for us. We cannot ever repay our debt to you, or begin to forget what you did. Why, the world will never forget what Yasodha did for the sons of Rohini and Devaki.

We left our boys, who had never seen their parents, with you, and you protected them as eyelids do the eyes! Because of your love, and Nanda's, they grew without fear or danger. You never thought of them as being other than your own; you loved and nurtured them as few natural parents do their sons.

Pious friends, the world is blessed by holy ones like yourselves, who make no difference between what is your own and what is not.'

Meanwhile, having found Krishna, the gopis stood transfixed, gazing at him and only cursing their eyelids that, now and again, by force of nature, they blinked, interrupting their stare. Through their eyes, they drew him, the beloved, down, down into their hearts. There, in the most secret places, they embraced him, and doing so, instantly found union with him, the Brahman, the ecstasy that the greatest Yogins hardly achieve.

Krishna took the gopis aside, away from the others, privately. Tenderly, he asked how they were. He stroked their hair and faces, embraced and kissed them, even as they communed with him in their deepest heart, their very souls.

Krishna said, 'Do you ever think of me? I have been forced to stay away from you for so many years only because I had to fight countless battles to protect my clan. I could not come away and feel my people were safe.

And for this do you think me ungrateful, or unloving? Ah, precious ones, it is fate that unites and separates us in this world, only fate. The wind blows clouds, cotton wisps, grass, and dust together, then blows them apart again, as if whimsically. So, too, does time unite and scatter us.

Only bhakti is permanent, only devotion to me bestows moksha, which is immortal bliss, and absolute freedom.'

Dazzling them with his smile, he said, 'And you have perfect bhakti, my sweet gopis, and you find me now within yourselves.

All that exists in this world is comprised of the five elements – earth, water, fire, air, and sky. These are their source and what they dissolve into. These five are within all that exists, and outside everything in creation as well.

For jivas, I am like the Panchamahabhutas, the elements: I am the source of all beings and what they dissolve into finally. Yet, remember, the material world does not dwell in the jiva, who experiences it, but only in the five elements. The jiva lives in the material world, of the elements, only as a being that experiences it – the jiva is not the cause of this world.

The world of the elements and the jiva dwell only in me. I am the cause of all causes, the Immortal Being; everything else is an expression of my Self. Thus, through the jiva, I experience the world of the elements.'

Deeply, yet so lightly, too, he spoke, and light flooded the hearts of the gopis absorbed in Him. This was Krishna's final teaching to the gopis he so loved. Long they meditated upon his words and deeply, and at last, all the women severed their sense of ego, and attained oneness with him, forever.

Sang the gypsy cowherdesses, in bliss, 'O You from whose navel the lotus of the world sprouts! The greatest Yogis, with the most profound understanding, fix their exalted minds upon your sacred feet in contemplation. For your feet are the only hope of all those that lie desperate in this disused well of samsara, of transmigratory life and death.

Ah Krishna, may your feet always shine in our hearts, even as we lead our lives as housewives,' prayed those most fortunate of women, those chosen ones."

KRISHNA'S WIVES SPEAK OF HIM

SRI SUKA SAID, "THUS KRISHNA BLESSED THE GOPIS, IN THEIR SPIRITS, and now he came to the Kurus and asked Yudhishtira, his brothers, their other friends and kin about their welfare.

How rapturous and purified of all their sins they felt, by touching his feet. They said fervently to him, Lord of all the worlds, 'Never shall any harm come to those that hear even a little of the amrita that is the praise of your holy feet from the lips of the Maharishis who have drunk deeply from that eternal font.

Truly, it is the only divine drink, which quenches the thirst of spiritual ignorance, frees them from bondage, and gives moksha to men.

Lord, by the irradiance of your Atman, you transcend the three states of waking, sleep, and dreams – all these born of the intellect. You are, instead, established in the infinite and pure Brahman, the Satchitananda, which is permanent and immutable, without ebb or flow.

With your Yogamaya, now, you have taken this human form, to protect and renew the message of the Veda, which has waned through time. Ah, we salute You, O sanctuary of the Paramahamsas!'

As the men gave praise to He that is foremost among all those that have divine fame, the Yadava and Kuru women began to speak among themselves about Krishna, his life and deeds, whose renown had spread through the triloka.

Draupadi said eagerly, 'O Rukmini, Bhadra, Jambavati, Kausalaa, Satyabhama, Kalindi, Saibya, Rohini, Lakshmanaa, tell us how this Krishna, who is God incarnate, came to marry each of you, like any mortal man!'

Rukmini answered first, and how she glowed at the memory of a momentous day. 'Like a lion taking its prey from a herd of sheep and goats, he carried me away, setting his feet on the proud heads of the kshatriyas gathered in my father's city, who had their bows raised to enforce my marriage to Sishupala.' She sighed, 'May I always have those sacred feet, in which the Devi Sri dwells, and their dust, to worship!'

Satyabhama replied, 'My father Satrajita accused Krishna of murdering my uncle Prasenajit to have the Sun-jewel, the Syamantaka, from him. Krishna went out into the wilderness and vanquished Chiranjivi Jambavan, who had in fact taken the jewel from the lion that killed Prasenajit. He returned to Dwaraka and gave the Syamantaka back to my father. I was already promised to Akrura. But my father feared for his life after the accusations he made against Krishna, and gave me to the Lord to be his wife. And ah, Krishna took me!'

Jambavati said, 'My father did not realise that Krishna and Sita's husband Rama, whom he always considered his Lord, were the same person. He fought Krishna for twenty-seven days for the Syamantaka, before he understood who Krishna really was. Then, Jambavan gave up both the jewel of the Sun and his daughter, me, to Krishna. And here I am today, my Lord's handmaiden.'

Kalindi said, 'I sat in tapasya in my house beneath the river, so that I might become his servant and find a place at his feet. But he came to my home with Arjuna, took my hand, and made me his wife. As for me, I would be happy to be a sweepress in his house.'

Mitravinda said, 'O Panchali, my father invited Krishna to come and take me for his wife. Since I was a small girl, my heart belonged to Krishna, who is my cousin. My father gave me away to him with every ceremony and an aksauhini. He took me with him to Dwaraka, home of fortune, vanquishing on the way the kshatriyas that waylaid us, even as a lion would its prey from a pack of dogs that claims it. Oh, all I want is to serve his lotus feet, life after life, after life, wherever my karma casts me. For, finally, the touch of his feet will give me moksha.'

Satya said, 'My father kept seven huge bulls to test the prowess of any kshatriya that came to ask my hand in marriage. Those awesome beasts had tamed the pretensions of numberless mighty kings. But when Krishna came, he overcame the bulls as boys do little lambs, and effortlessly bound them. The bride price he paid for me was this valour. Again, he routed the other kshatriyas that opposed him and brought me home to Dwaraka with all my sakhis and an army of four divisions – elephant, horse, chariot and footsoldiers.

May I always be blessed with the fortune of serving his lotus feet.'

Lakshmanaa's story was slightly longer. 'I heard about Krishna from Narada Muni, about his incarnation and all the wondrous things he had done. I could never stop thinking that this was he whom the Devi Lakshmi, with the lotus in her hand, had chosen over the Lokapalas. I became obsessed by the thought of Krishna, who grants moksha.

My father, King Brihatsena, became aware of my love, and he thought of a way to fulfil my heart's desire.

O Draupadi, when a bridegroom was to be found for you, your father had a matsya yantra fashioned and suspended it over a trough of water. The spinning golden fish was hidden from view and the archer that would win your hand must bring it down aiming only at its reflection in the water. King Drupada devised this unique method so only Arjuna could win your hand.

My father, also, made a similar target, a matsya yantra, and invited the greatest kshatriyas in Bharatavarsha to come and vie for my hand. This fish was smaller than the one at your ceremony and hung at twice the height.

Many kshatriyas came to the contest of archery. All these were skilled bowmen, and they arrived with their Gurus and Acharyas. My father received them honourably, according to their age and stature, and fetched them into the arena where a great bow and arrow awaited them.

At your swayamavara, O Panchali, each archer was allowed to shoot five arrows at the spinning fish; at mine, there was only a single arrow. One by one, the kshatriyas mounted the dais above which the little golden fish spun.

The first few bowmen picked up the great bow, but could not string it. Others strung it, but the bowstring snapped back at them so violently that it knocked them down.

Then greater archers mounted the dais and my heart fluttered, for they were mighty men and it seemed to me that any of them might find the target and win me for his bride. Jarasandha, Ambashtha, Sishupala, Bheema, Duryodhana, Karna – all these easily hefted the bow, strung it and shot their arrow, aiming by peering down into the silver trough of water.

Above them, the fish not only spun, but swung round at the end of its string in a wide arc, so the archers caught only the most fleeting glimpses of it. They all missed their mark. Then Arjuna strung the bow and took aim. My heart was in my mouth, for here I knew was one that would not miss his mark.

The sun had climbed high into the sky, almost overhead. Arjuna aimed at his ease and loosed the arrow. We heard the sound of the shaft finding its mark and I felt as if I would die. However, Arjuna's barb only grazed the fish, and did not bring it down.

When all the proud kshatriyas and kings failed to bring the golden fish down, my Lord Krishna mounted the dais, as always smiling. Quicker than the eye could see, he snatched up the massive bow, strung it, set the arrow to its string, looked briefly down into the vessel of water at his feet and shot the fish through its eye and brought it down.

It was the auspicious moment of abhijita. It was high noon and the sun was directly overhead, so Krishna could not see anything but its blinding disc in the water in the trough! He shot down the fish without ever seeing it.

Cries of "Jaya!" rent the sky, into which my heart soared. Dundubhis sounded in the sky and the Devas poured down a rain of flowers over us all. Shyly, my head bowed, I was led into the arena. Complete silence had fallen and my anklets chimed so loudly, Panchali!

I wore pure white silk, and my black hair was laden with mallika and other flowers. Slowly, I raised my face, while my earrings shot shafts of sunlight around me, and I smiled slightly, respectfully, at all the assembled kshatriyas.

I had a golden necklace in my hand, and walking up to Krishna, I draped the shining thing around his neck. I also draped a garland of fragrant wildflowers around his shoulders.

At once, a storm of mridangas, gomukhas, sankhas, maddalas, and every other kind of instrument burst into life. The singers burst into song, and men and women, our finest dancers, wove their graceful and joyous movements around us.

But, Yagnaseni, not all the humbled kshatriyas were pleased with my choice of a husband – the Lord of the universe. They began to mumble angrily among themselves. Krishna swept me into his chariot, the Jaitra, and in a wink seized up his bow, the Saringa, and stood ready for battle.

Ah Queen, the other kings stood frozen to see him like that, and his sarathy Daruka flashed away from the arena. Krishna had taken me, too, as the lion calmly does his prey from under the noses of other beasts.

The kshatriyas recovered and gave pursuit. Some overtook us in their chariots, and barred our way. They stood in their rathas, bows raised, truly like a pack of wild dogs facing a lion.

Without warning, he loosed a blinding tide of arrows at them from the Saringa – quicker than seeing. Many died, with their limbs severed, shredded by his unearthly archery. The rest fled.

We rode on, and as the Sun entered his palace in the west, Krishna entered his city in the sea. Dwaraka was hung with bright and immense banners, adorned with festoons and buntings – Ocean City whose renown spread like the sun's light across the Earth and seeped up into Swarga.

Meanwhile, my father gave away priceless gifts to Krishna's kin, friends and other companions – clothes, ornaments, household goods, fine furniture. To my Lord, who is always content in himself, who has no needs, my father gave a bevy of female servitors, great gold and treasure, and an army with elephant, horse, chariot and footsoldiers.'

Suddenly, she paused, blushing self-consciously, feeling she had said more than the others. Quickly, as if to appease them, especially those older than herself, she added, 'We have all relinquished every other desire and attachment, O Draupadi, to become the maidservants of He who is always immersed in his own natural rapture.'

Now, the other sixteen thousand consorts of Krishna said, 'Krishna slew Narakasura, who was also called Bhaumasura, the son of Bhumi Devi and the Varahavatara. He then released us, the daughters of kings and Sages of the four quarters, whom Naraka had vanquished or killed and taken us as his spoils of war.

We had nowhere to go and Krishna, though he is beyond desire and the bestower of moksha, took us for his wives. Long had we meditated upon his salvational feet, and he was happy to bring us home to Dwaraka and keep each of us in a separate palace and be there for each of us as a husband by his divine power.

Noble Panchali, we have no lust for power or empire, not for the kingdom of Indra, for the pleasures of this world or the next, not for the eight mahasiddhis, why, not the condition of Brahmatva, or even Vaikuntha, where everyone finds moksha.

All of us have a single wish – that forever and ever we carry the sacred dust from the feet of Gadadhara, Krishna the mace-wielder, upon our heads: the padadhuli that bears the fragrance of the sacred saffron powder with which the Devi Mahalakshmi anoints her breasts.

All we want is the touch of his feet who is the cowherd, he who is the single object of the love of the gopas and gopis, of all the tribal women of the jungles of Vrindavana, why of the trees, plants and vines of that forest!' "

VASUDEVA'S YAGNA AT SAMANTAPANCHAKA

SRI SUKA DEVA CONTINUED, "LISTENING TO THE FERVOUR OF KRISHNA'S wives, tears of joy coursed down the faces of all the other women – Kunti, Subala's daughter Gandhari, Yagnasena's daughter Panchali, Krishna's sister Subhadra, the wives of all the mighty kshatriyas present there, and of course, the gopis!

As they all stood speaking together in that most sacred tirtha – men with men, women with women – a large group of the most exalted Rishis arrived there to meet Rama and Krishna. Among them were Vyasa, Narada, Chyvana, Devala, Asita, Viswamitra, Satananda, Bharadwaja, Gautama, Parasurama with his sishyas, Vasishta, Gavala, Bhrigu, Pulastya, Kashyapa, Atri, Markandeya, Bhrihaspati, Dvita, Trita, Ekata, Sanaka and his brother Kumaras, Angiras, Agastya, Yagnavalkya and Vamadeva.

When they saw these greatest of all great Sages, Rama, Krishna and all the kshatriyas rose to greet and worship them with arghya, holy water, fragrant garlands, incense, sandalwood paste, and sashtanga namaskara, eight-limbed prostrations. Then Krishna, the Avatara, spoke gently, humbly to those Mahamunis, while the assembly listened in perfect silence, enraptured.

Said the Lord, 'Our lives have now truly borne fruit that we have the fortune of meeting you, the greatest Munis together. Why, it is a blessing that not the Devas easily find, and very rarely.

Now, we mortals, of little punya we have from worshipping the idols of God and going on tirthayatras, have the profound honour of meeting, touching and prostrating ourselves before the holiest Rishis in creation!

I do not say that the sacred rivers are not holy. It is true that God's images in clay and stone are blessed and full of grace. But these take a long time to cleanse a mortal's mind, while meeting a Maharishi instantly purifies a man.

Fire, the sun and moon, the stars, earth, water, air, the sky, speech, the intellect – all these and every other element and god that men worship cannot rid them of their desire to sin, which retards their spiritual growth. For all such worship is rooted in selfishness and the delusion that one is different from and apart from other men.

Yet, even a moment's darshana of a Maharishi burns up the ignorance, that darkness in which sin has its font.

Men look upon their bodies, which are walking corpses made of the three gunas, as their selves, their souls. Men look upon their wives and kin as being their own; they look upon idols of clay and stone as objects of worship and pools of water as sacred tirthas. These same men never see the holiest Sages as God incarnate, as divine. Surely, such blind men can only be called donkeys bearing grass for cattle!'

Earnestly Krishna spoke, and the Sages sat silent, bemused, momentarily perplexed – this was God's Avatara who spoke about them, the Rishis, as if they were his superiors, ones whom he would worship. Then they understood – Krishna was setting an example for the others gathered there, indeed for the world, showing them how they should revere the Munis who had come to Samantapanchaka.

When they understood him, those Sages smiled among themselves and said, 'They say that none among the enlightened are as wise as we are. Even the Prajapatis acknowledge this and come to us for counsel. Yet, you, O Lord, delude us so easily with your maya.

We look at you and see an ordinary mortal, while in truth you are the Paramatman, the lord of maya, the final reality, Devadeva, God of gods. Ah Krishna, how exquisite, how marvellous is your lila, your divine sport. It takes our breath away!

As all the multifarious beings and entities emerge from the Earth; from you, the immutable, desireless One, the universe, all the worlds and galaxies, emerges, and you sustain and destroy it. This vast labour does not affect you in the least, and you are always perfect and perfectly serene.

Ah, such a beautiful miracle that You, the Infinite One, assume the form of a man and come down to sport upon this Bhumi!

Yes, this is one of the rare times when you have incarnated yourself in a form of sattva – to protect the blameless and to annihilate the evil ones that tyrannise them. You have come, Lord, to clear the path of the Veda again. You, O Parama Purusha, are the soul of the varnasrama dharma.

The Veda is your pristine heart. He that studies the Veda and meditates upon it, while controlling his senses and being austere, surely finds you, the Godhead who creates and sustains the universe. Such a student also discovers you in your transcendent Form, immaculate, beyond all causes and effects.

And Krishna, you are Brahmanyadeva – you always bear a special love for us Munis, in whom the Vedic illumination shines. Eternal, infinite One, You are the source of the Veda and Veda is the door and the path that leads to you. And we, by embodying the Veda are indeed blessed to be your abode.

Today, Lord, our lives have found fulfilment that we have met you face to face. Our quest for knowledge, our ceaseless tapasya, and our spiritual vision – all these have found fruition, because we have looked upon your face and form. For you are perfect, you are the incarnation of every divine quality that a man can have.

We salute you, O Krishna, who have hidden your Godhood with your Yogamaya; you are the Supreme Being, the Lord. And your spiritual vision remains unclouded even in this your incarnate form.

None of these kshatriyas, even your own Yadavas, among whom you live every day, knows Who you truly are, for you have masked yourself with your maya, appearing as a man, you who are the Brahman, the Holy Spirit, who are Kaala that devours the universe.

A sleeping man experiences his dreams as reality; he thinks of his dream ego as his self while he is asleep, and does not remember who he is when he is awake. So, too, these men, their consciousness dimmed by your maya, do not recognise you, who are the only Reality, from whom the universe, all these forms and names, has issued.

But today we have been blessed because we have seen your sacred feet. The Ganga, who washes the sins of men, springs from your feet. Not the greatest Yogis see your holy feet except in their minds, in dhyana. Now we see those lotus feet, O Krishna, before our eyes.

Lord, bless us, bless us that we may always be your bhaktas – for only with bhakti has any jiva ever cloven the shell of maya, this samsara, and found union with you. Devotion is the only fruitful path to follow; Krishna, bless us with bhakti for you, there is no greater or higher blessing.'

Haven spoken thus, the Rishis bid farewell to Krishna, Dhritarashtra, Yudhishtira and the others, and made ready to depart. Seeing them about to leave, the noble Vasudeva accosted them, prostrating at their feet.

He clasped the Munis' feet, and said with deep reverence, 'I salute you, in whom the Vedas and the Devatas dwell. Awesome Munis, I beg you, tell me how we can transcend this world of time and karma by performing karma.'

Narada said, 'Vasudeva thinks of Krishna as being just his son, and here he is asking us about how to find moksha. Surely, that old adage that familiarity breeds a certain irreverence is true. Men that live on the banks of the Ganga seek other waters in which to purify themselves!

Krishna is perfect and not Kaala, who creates and destroys the universes, affects him. Evanescence has no sway over him, nor any other force that has its source in Prakriti or her gunas.

No imperfection touches him, not karma with its two faces of joy and sorrow, or all the great movements and forces of Nature. Yet, he dons the mortal sheaths of prana and the other coverings of a human body – all aspects of his shakti – and men do not see or know him for what he truly is. He becomes like the sun hidden by clouds, mist, or by Rahu.'

Then, in the presence of the gathered kshatriyas, the Rishis said to Vasudeva, 'It is well known that the best way to overcome karma, even of the deepest past and other lives, is to worship Vishnu Narayana, the Lord of karma and yagnas, with sacrifices undertaken with faith and humility.

All the great agree that performing yagnas and one's swadharma as an offering to Vishnu bring peace of mind, and finally lead to moksha. For grihastas among dvijas, the twice-born, the way to moksha is to worship Vishnu with solemn yagnas, using wealth gained by righteous means.

O Vasudeva, man overcomes his desires by indulging them in accordance with dharma. He transcends the desire for wealth by performing sacrifices and giving charity. He overcomes his sexual desires and his yearning to have children by marrying and begetting sons and daughters. He passes beyond his desires for the pleasures of Swarga by developing his discrimination so he sees the impermanence of those enjoyments.

All Mahatmas relinquished these three kinds of desires, while they lived in the world, and only then took Sannyasa in the forest.

All dvijas are born with a triune debt – to the Devas, to the Rishis, and to the Pitrs. They repay these debts with yagnas, the study of the Veda, and by begetting a son to continue their line. If any of the twice-born renounce the worldly life without discharging this dharma, his spirit devolves.

You, Vasudeva, have already freed yourself from your dharma to the Rishis and the Pitrs, but the time has come for you to undertake a yagna to pay what you owe the Devas. When you have done this, you can leave your home in freedom and in peace, and become a Sannyasi and a Yogin.'

The Sages paused, with shining eyes, before saying fervently, 'Ah Vasudeva, you have certainly worshipped the Lord of all the galaxies, Sri Hari, with untold bhakti – for hasn't He been born as your son!'

When the noble Vasudeva heard what the Rishis said, he prostrated at their feet, and begged them to be his priests at the mahayagnas he would now perform. Chosen by Vasudeva, willing and keen, those holiest of Sages undertook many mighty sacrifices in that most sacred place, Samantapanchaka.

When Vasudeva swore the vow of initiation, all the Yadavas and the other kshatriyas bathed in the lustrous waters, put on garlands of lotuses, silken clothes and their best ornaments.

Their women, also, wore their finest silks, golden necklaces, more precious jewellery, saffron marks upon their faces and bodies, and entered the yagnashala with every sort of auspicious offering in their hands.

Panchvaadya, and even more percussion instruments, big and small, sounded in subtle, masterly unison, the musicians played and sang in rapture, and the dancers streamed in, men and women, weaving their exotic rhythms, many so light-footed they seemed to float on air.

Mortal minstrels played, and immortal ones, as well, at Vasudeva's yagnashala; Gandharvis raised their heavenly sweet voices in ecstatic harmony with those of their men.

The profound brahmanas, those matchless Munis, drenched Vasudeva in holy, consecrated water. He had smeared his body with butter and lined his eyes with bright black kohl. He stood radiant, with his eighteen wives surrounding him, even like the full moon among the stars.

Yes, how resplendent Vasudeva was among his queens – eighteen of them richly clad and adorned, wearing the most priceless bracelets, pearl strings, earrings and anklets, while he wore the skin of a deer, a black buck.

Maharaja, the priests for that sacrifice, wearing silks and fine jewels, were as splendid as the priests of Indra in his yagnashala, and the others who attended Vasudeva's yagna were hardly less illustrious than the Devas of Indra's sabha.

Of course, foremost among that assembly of the noble were Rama and Krishna, who, together, were the Lord Himself, master of the destiny of all jivas. They sat radiant amidst their wives, sons and daughters, and their other clansmen – all manifestations of the glory of the Brahman.

The rituals began. Vasudeva performed the rites prescribed in the praakrita – the darsha, purnamasa, and the jyotishtoma; he performed the vaikrita yagnas, which are unwritten extensions created by master ritualists. With all these, he worshipped Krishna, the Avatara of the ultimate Godhood, who is lord of the ingredients of the sacrifice, the rituals of the yagna, and who is, indeed, the yagna itself.

When these were completed, Vasudeva gave away bounteous gifts of gold and jewels to the Maharishis who had officiated at his sacrifice; he gave them vast lands, cows, and young women, too, to serve them.

To mark the end of the mahayagna, Vasudeva performed the patni samyagna and the other rituals associated with the avabhrita. The Maharishis and the other brahmanas now followed him to the sacred lake of Parasurama Bhargava for the last ablution.

When he had bathed, Vasudeva gifted away all his clothes and ornaments to the singers, musicians, and dancers. His wives did the same. Now, Vasudeva donned exquisite new robes and jewellery, and he held a banquet to end all feasts. All men were fed; why, all animals as well, down to the meanest dog, ate their fill.

With his queens and sons around him, Vasudeva gave the most precious gifts to all those who had attended his yagna – the Vidarbhas, the Kosalas, the Kauravas, the people of Kasi, which only Lord Siva rules, the Kekayas, the Srinjayas.

He gave lavishly to everyone who sat in his yagnashala – the Devas, the Brahmanas, the Pitrs, the Charanas, the Gandharvas, and all the other divine and half-divine ones that had come. One by one, they now took their leave, and went away without exception praising the sacrifice of Vasudeva.

Other clansmen, fond friends and allies came forward now to embrace the Yadavas, before leaving Samantapanchaka to return to their homes; among these were Dhritarashtra, Vidura, the sons of Kunti, Bheeshma, Nakula, Sahadeva, Narada and Vyasa Muni. Their hearts were awash with love, yet full of sorrow at the leavetaking.

The devoted Nanda, however, decided that he would remain at the sacred lake. Ugrasena, Balarama and Krishna welcomed this and looked after him with fond love and care.

Having successfully completed his yagna, one day, sitting among his kin, Vasudeva affectionately took Nanda's hand, and said to him, 'My brother, not kshatriyas with all their strength or Yogis with their deepest gyana can sever the bonds of love with which the Lord has bound his creatures!

I look at you and marvel at the love you have for us. Our debt to you for all that you did for us can never be repaid. Moreover, we have been neglectful of you and yours through the years. Yet, O Nanda, look at the love you still bear us.'

He paused, sighed, and continued, 'Once, we could not requite what you did for us because of Kamsa and because we were impoverished ourselves. But now, we have grown arrogant with wealth, and blind in our spirits, so that we scarcely notice how great you are that stand before our eyes.

But your nature, though you see clearly, is to always love and honour us. Ah, truly do the wise say, it is best that those whose goal is moksha never find the power and wealth of state. For when a man is blinded by prosperity, he hardly recognises his own blood, his relatives, his dearest friends.'

Saying this and now remembering everything Nanda had done for him, Vasudeva shook with sobs. As for Nanda Gopa, out of his love for Rama and Krishna, and from his simple desire to please his friend Vasudeva, he stayed on there for a full three months. Every night, he would tell himself that he must leave the next day, but when the day came he allowed himself to be persuaded to stay on for just another.

Finally, however, he did leave. The Yadavas sent him back with much honour and retinue to Vraja. Nanda returned to Vrindavana with an army to accompany him, with his gopas and gopis, his precious herd, and, also, many gifts that Vasudeva, Ugrasena, Uddhava, Krishna and Rama gave him – treasures of jewels and ornaments, the finest silks, and all sorts of other household wares.

It is true that Nanda, his gopas and gopis left for Vraja, but they left their hearts behind at the feet of the Blue God, for they had made an offering of these to him.

Now, monsoon winds blew and clouds began to gather, and Krishna and the Vrishnis also left Samantapanchaka and returned to Dwaraka. There the people, those that had remained behind, rejoiced, and those that had gone described in detail everything that had occurred at Parasurama's sacred lake, especially Vasudeva's yagna.' "

KRISHNA AND HIS PARENTS

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "ONE MORNING, HIS SONS RAMA AND KRISHNA came to Vasudeva, as was their custom, to wish him.

He asked affectionately how they were this day, and his heart was full of love. He had heard from the Maharishis who his sons truly were, and of course he had seen the miracles they performed in Mathura and Dwaraka, almost daily.

Now he said to them with some fervour, 'Krishna, Krishna, Mahayogin! Samkarshana, Sanatana, Eternal One! You are the Purusha and the Pradhana, the cause of the universe, and you are the Spirit that is beyond the universe.

You are He in whom creation abides. Only from you, by you and for you, creation comes to exist. You are the mover of the universe and its movement. You are Time, in which the universe expresses itself. Yes, I do know that you are Purusha and Pradhana, and the Lord of all things.

O Spirit who transcends the senses, you project this myriad universe into time, you permeate it, and sustain it as vital Prana – font of energy – and as Jiva: the source of intelligence.

Not prana or any of the other great powers and forces that cause the universe to evolve exist by themselves, but are all aspects of you, O Godhead. Even as the sharpest sword depends on the swordsman to strike an enemy down, prana and the other vital forces depend upon you to be effectual.

How different their natures are: the blind forces of Prana, and the intelligent ones born of the Jiva. For the Spirit is intelligent, while prana and the other vital forces are not. Intelligent beings move entities without intelligence to fulfil their purposes of existence – to act meaningfully.

Ah, you are the lambency of the moon, the heat of the fire, the brilliance of the sun, the twinkling of the stars and the flash of lightning. You are the unmoving stance of the mountain, the fecundity of the earth, and her fragrance.

Lord, you are the potency in water to quench thirst and its power to make life grow. You are its taste. From you the vital airs obtain their power to enliven the senses, the body and mind, and enable creatures to move.

You are the vastness of the sky, the cardinal points, the quarters, the cosmic firmament. You are the original sound, Sphota, which is the Paraa, the primeval form of speech. You are the articulation of that first sound, now called Pasyanti; you are Madhyama, called Omkara. You are also common speech, our words, known as Vaikhari.

You are the power in the senses and in the Gods that preside over them, and the force that controls them. You are the power of the intellect to know. You are the superior faculty of the jiva – to remember, to recollect.

You are the Tamasahamkara, which causes the elements; you are the Rajasahamkara, which is the origin of the senses, and the Sattvikahamkara, from which the Devatas come, who rule the elements, the senses and the mind. You are Pradhana, who catalyse the evolution of transmigrating jivas.

Only the gold remains constant in golden ornaments that are melted down and refashioned, or clay in things fashioned of clay, then broken and refashioned into other objects. So, too, in this ever dying, ever remade world, only you, the essential substance of all things, remain, constant, unchanging – the eternal, immortal One.

With your Yogamaya, you project Prakriti, and her three gunas of sattva, rajas, and tamas with their opposite attributes of pain and pleasure – upon yourself. Being shadows, without independent substance, they do not change you in the least manner.

As long as your maya casts these onto you, the universe is observed to exist, and this samsara. You are always inherent in its relative existence. When you withdraw your maya, the universe dissolves, and you are a singular, immaculate Being again, Chitta, with no second, nothing beside you.

Those that are bound by karma become unaware of your ubiquitous and subtle presence, O Spirit of the Universe, immutable and immanent behind the shadow play, this masquerade of life and death, always transcending it. These jivas transmigrate.

Lord of everything, a human birth, with all its finer faculties, such as the mind and the intellect, is hard indeed to obtain. I have been born a man, but, deluded by your maya, I have wasted this precious life by not fulfilling its true purpose – to seek you in my heart.

With the thongs of ego and ignorance – of identifying with the body and thinking that others related through the body in some fashion belong to one – with these, you bind the whole world.

Rama, Krishna, you are not my sons. You are the Brahman, the Lord of Purusha and Prakriti. You have merely come in these apparent human forms to remove the burden of the Earth, the burden of evil kshatriyas, of tyrants. You say so yourself.

Friend of those that suffer, now I seek sanctuary at your holy feet, which wipe away grief and darkness. Thus far I have thought of you, O God of Gods, as my son, and of this body of mine as my soul. I have been prey to the lusts of the flesh, its pleasures, and these blinded me to the truth. Enough now, my Lord! I renounce all my sensual addictions.'

Vasudeva paused, visibly moved by what he was saying himself. Then he resumed, 'Even on the day you were born, you appeared to us as Vishnu, and I can never forget how you said, "I am the Un-born, eternal One. Yet, I incarnate myself from age to age to uphold dharma in the world, the Sanatana Dharma that I have laid down for men".

You are as formless and limitless as the sky, and like the sky, limiting yourself, you assume one aspect and form after the other and shed these, too. Who can fathom your Yogamaya, O you of infinite renown?'

Krishna, crown jewel of the Yadava clan, listened silently to his father. When Vasudeva had finished, Krishna bowed low to him, and said, smiling, 'O my father, all that you have said about us, your sons, is no less than the truth and it is supremely important.

Noblest of Yadus, every being, why, every creature and object, all creation, are forms of the Brahman – I, you, my brother, the people of Dwaraka.

The Panchamahabhutas, the five elements, manifest and vanish, as creatures and things great and small, unique and myriad. So, also, the Atman, which is always one, assumes different forms, material and subtle, small and great.'

Rajan, listening to Krishna, vast light and joy broke over the spirit of Vasudeva. The words were simple, yet, for he that spoke them, the very notion of manifold creation melted from Vasudeva's heart and was replaced by an immense, blissful unity. The Yadava sat absorbed, silent, at peace."

Suka Deva paused briefly in his narration of the Purana, before taking up the sacred thread again, "Best of the Kurus, Devaki, amsavatara of all the Devis, was also there in that chamber with them. She had been wonderstruck when she heard how her sons brought Guru Sandipani's dead son back to life.

Now, suddenly, a great sorrow for her own children, whom Kamsa had slaughtered when they were mere infants, welled up in her. Tears flowed down her face, and she cried to her living sons, 'Balarama, who has no measure, delighter of hearts! O Krishna, who bestow the fruit of their Yoga to the master Yogis! I see you for what you both are – the Sires of the progenitors of the universe, why, of Brahma, and the First and Primeval Being.

The wise say that you have been born from me to rid Bhumi Devi of her burden of evil kings, who have lost their sattvika natures through the passing ages, and who break the dharma of kings laid down by you in the holy Shastras, who have become a scourge upon this Earth.

Krishna, Soul of the universe, I seek refuge in you today – you who create, support and destroy the cosmos, with the most infinitesimal portion of yourself, the particles that are the gunas of Prakriti.

When your Guru asked you, you brought his long-dead son back from Yama and gave him to your master as your Guru dakshina. Today, I, your mother, beg you – help me see my sons, whom Kamsa, king of the Bhojas, killed.'

Scion of Bharata, when Devaki asked Rama and Krishna for this, they used their power of maya to fly to Sutala, one of the nether worlds. As they entered that darkling realm, Mahabali, king of Daityas, recognised them; he saw the soul of the universe in them; he knew they were the Lords of all the worlds.

Great Bali knew they were Vishnu, the God he worshipped. Bali and all his court rose in joy to welcome Rama and Krishna, and prostrated before the two Avataras.

Bali gave them his throne to sit upon, he washed their feet, and sprinkled the water over his own head and the heads of his family and everyone in his sabha. That wisest of Asuras knew the water that had washed the feet of the Incarnations of the Lord Vishnu was sacred enough to purify all creation, even Brahma.

He now showered every honour over Rama and Krishna, bounteously, from his awesome resources. Splendid clothes he gave them and invaluable ornaments. He offered them betel leaves, adored them by waving lamps before them. He fed them the most rare delicacies in the three worlds, and offered them himself, his family members, his kingdom and all his wealth.

Clasping Krishna's feet, setting his head down upon those feet repeatedly, his heart melting in tides of love, his hair standing on end and tears streaming down his face, Mahabali now spoke to the Blue God in an unsteady voice.

The magnificent Bali said, 'I salute you, O Infinite One that, as Adisesha, supports the universe upon one of you numberless heads! I prostrate myself before you who are the abode of the galaxies. Salutations Krishna, creator of the Samkhya and of Yoga, Immanent One, O Supreme Spirit!

Few of the created are so fortunate that they see you with their eyes. Yet, sometimes, your bhaktas are blessed with that vision, with no effort on their part, but only by your grace. We are Asuras, demons whose nature is comprised of rajas and tamas. Yet, look how today you grant us the final beatitude of seeing you, having you among us!

Daityas, Danavas, the Gandharvas, Siddhas, Vidyadharas, Charanas, Yakshas, Rakshasas, Pisachas, Bhutas, Pramathas and the other denizens of the Patalas are, by our very natures, inimical to you. For you are purely sattvik, and manifest through the immaculate Shastra that comprises your body.

Yet, among our dark races are those that attain to you more swiftly than any Deva – some through the communion of enmity, others with the persistent rigour and passion of the sexual tantra. Truly, often, the rajasic and tamasic ones find you before the Gods of sattva!

You are He that bestows the fruit of the tapasya of the Yogis. Not the Mahayogis have plumbed or unravelled your Yogamaya – what it is or how it works. What then to say of us Asuras, whose natures are bound in darkness and passion.

We never give a thought toward the ceaseless quest of those that relinquish desire: the sanctuary of your sacred feet. Instead, we steep ourselves with all our lusts in the life of the world and the senses – the disused well in which there is no water to quench the thirst of the spirit.

We beg you to lift us out of the desolate well of samsara. Lord, turn us into ascetics and hermits that live under holy trees, living humbly off such fruit they offer. Or let us become wandering mendicants that range the world in the company of men who have found the spring of universal love in their hearts.

O Supreme Master, give us discipline and direction. Make us sinless. For he that is established in the Bhagavata Dharma, your Law, is freed from the Vedic ritual, and its compulsions.'

Krishna said, 'During Svayambhuva Manu's Manvantara, Marichi Muni had six sons by his wife Oorna. These six laughed once at Brahma, when they saw him overcome by lust and trying to make love to his daughter.

Instantly, Brahma cursed them to be born Asuras, as the sons of Hiranyakashyapu. Later, at Vishnu's behest, Maya planted them in Devaki's womb. They were born as her sons, and Kamsa killed each of them. Now, Devi Devaki thinks of them as being her own sons and mourns for them still, after all these years. She weeps for them often.

King of Daityas, those six live with you in your kingdom. We want to wipe our mother's tears, O Mahabali, so let us take those six with us to her. Coming with me, they will be freed from the curse of Brahma, and return to their original homes, in their own ancient and lustrous forms

Later, the six – Smara, also called Keertiman, Udgitha, Parishvanga, Patanga, Kshudrabhrit and Ghrini – shall find moksha by my grace.'

Mahabali agreed at once. He worshipped Rama and Krishna, and they returned to Dwaraka with the six that Devaki believed to be her murdered sons. Krishna brought the six to her.

Overwhelmed by maternal love, Devaki felt her breasts well with a mother's milk. He set those six in her lap, and she, turn by turn, hugged them, kissed them, sniffed the crowns of their heads, repeatedly.

Deluded by Vishnu's maya that they were her sons, she felt a tide of delight wash over her, and she suckled those six! Drinking that amrita, from the breasts at which Krishna Gadaadhara had drunk, and thus coming into intimate mystic contact with the body of Narayana, the six souls remembered who they were.

They prostrated before Krishna, before Balarama, Devaki and Vasudeva, and as everyone present there in Dwaraka watched in wonder, they melted into luminous forms and ascended into the realm to which they belonged, the unearthly places.

Rajan, Devaki was wonderstruck at the return of her sons and their vanishing again. But her heart was at deep peace, and she knew that Krishna's mystic power had made this possible, and had healed her old and savage wound.

O Scion of the line of the immortal Bharata, beyond count are the profound and playful exploits of dark Krishna, the Paramatman, he of infinite love and mercy," said Suka Deva.'

Says the Suta Romaharshana, 'The son of Vyasa, Suka Deva's, sacred narration of the life of Murari, is nectar to the ears of the Lord's bhaktas. It is more precious than the most invaluable jewels, and a cure for the sins of men.

He that listens to this Bhagavatam with perfect attention, and devotion, and also brings other men to hear it, why, he shall attain to the condition of becoming the Lord Vishnu himself, which state is beyond the sufferings of time.'

THE MARRIAGE OF SUBHADRA AND THE TALE OF SRUTADEVA

THE SUTA ROMAHARSHANA CONTINUES,

'Raja Parikshit said, "Holy one, tell me how Arjuna married my grandmother Subhadra, who was Balarama and Krishna's sister."

Sri Suka Deva resumed his Purana. "Arjuna, the noble, once ranged the length and breadth of Bharatavarsha on a pilgrimage. He came to Prabhasa and heard about his uncle Vasudeva's daughter Subhadra.

He also heard that Balarama wanted to give her to Duryodhana, to become the fiendish Kaurava's wife, but the rest of the family would not agree to this match. Arjuna wanted Subhadra for himself. He donned the robes of a tridandi Sannyasin, a bearer of three staffs – the dandas indicating control over mind, speech and actions – and went to Dwaraka, disguised.

He remained in the Sea City through the months of the monsoon. He sat under a tree, and the people of Dwaraka came to worship the Sannyasin, as did Balarama. None of them saw through the disguise of the ash-coated warrior.

One day, Balarama invited the tridandi to his palace and lavished his hospitality upon the 'Sage' whom he had come to think of as a most holy one. He fed the tridandi all sorts of rare sweetmeats, with great reverence and attention.

In Balarama's house Arjuna first laid eyes on Subhadra, whose beauty could steal the heart of any kshatriya, even the greatest. Arjuna, the Sannyasi, fell madly in love with her. His pulse raced, his mighty heart fluttered, and he stared unwinkingly at the exquisite princess.

Subhadra looked at the splendid Sage, whose magnificent form could capture any woman's heart. She, too, was lost instantly in love, and stood rooted, gazing upon him, shyly, but her heart pounding out of all control.

Then on, Arjuna had no peace. Always, his thoughts were with Subhadra, and his mind conceived scheme after scheme to abduct her, to have her for his wife.

Arjuna secretly met Devaki, Vasudeva, and Krishna, and, revealing himself to them, confessed his love for the princess. They were delighted and gave him their blessing to elope with her. Krishna helped in the planning of the elopement, lending his cousin his own chariot and horses.

One day, when Subhadra emerged from her palace, riding Krishna's chariot, Arjuna mounted the ratha and drove away with her. He had abandoned his Sannyasi's garb, had his bow in his hand, and effortlessly scattered the powerful guards that tried to stop him. Amidst the pandemonium that broke out among the people of Dwaraka, who did not know who he was, the Pandava carried away his beloved prize even as the lion does his prey.

When Balarama heard what had happened, his rage rose up like the sea swelling on the night of the full moon. Then Krishna and the others, including his mother and father, pleaded with him, some even touching Balarama's feet – that Subhadra could not find a worthier husband.

Rama calmed down, slowly the great Yadava accepted the match. He sent his guard commander after the couple, with lavish gifts and with an army with footsoldiers, cavalry, chariots and elephants as Subhadra's dowry, besides a host of male and female servants."

Suka Deva paused, before going on to his next story of Krishna. "A certain brahmana called Srutadeva was a devout Krishna bhakta, the sole aim and absorption of his life being his devotion. Srutadeva was wise, serene, and had restrained his senses.

He lived a grihasta's life in Mithila, capital of the Videhas, and eked out a living with whatever fate brought him. He found that each day he got exactly enough to meet his needs, and never more. Perfectly content with this, he performed his daily ritual and his worship.

Rajan, the king of the Videhas in those days was Bahulasva, a wise kshatriya, a Rajarishi free from pride. The brahmana Srutadeva and the king Bahulasva were devotees of the Lord, and he loved them both.

Once, Krishna journeyed to Videha in his chariot. Daruka went with him as his sarathy, and so did a retinue of Rishis. Krishna came to Mithila with the Munis Narada, Vamadeva, Ạtri, Vedavyasa, Parasurama, Asita, Aruni, Brihaspati, Kanva, Maitreya, Chyvana, and many others. I, also, O Parikshit, went with Krishna on that occasion.

As Krishna passed through village, town and city, their people came out to welcome him, with all kinds of gifts and offerings. They worshipped him as men do the rising sun, and they worshipped the Sages as they do the planets in the sky.

Krishna journeyed through the kingdoms of Anarta, Dhanva, Kuru, Jangala, Kanka, Matsya, Panchala, Kunti, Madhu, Kekaya, Kosala and Rina. The men and women of those lands came and gazed upon his divine form and his face like a lotus of a thousand petals, and he looked back at them, and favoured them with his loving and irresistible smile.

Those people looked at Krishna, Jagadguru, the final spiritual preceptor of all the worlds, and the darkness of ignorance vanished from their eyes and their hearts. The very sight of him opened their eyes of wisdom, and they found moksha. At his ease, he journeyed, and along his way, men and Gandharvas sang his praises that make ashes of sins. Finally, he reached the kingdom of Videha.

Here, too, the people, villager and citizen, heard that the immaculate Achyuta had arrived in their kingdom and rushed out to greet him, in joy and bringing every sort of offering and worship.

They looked at him of the highest fame, and their hearts and faces bloomed in ineffable delight. He was a vision before their eyes, and they fell on the ground and adored him with prostrations, with their palms joined over their heads: in sashtanga namaskara. They worshipped the awesome Muni who travelled with him, similarly.

His bhaktas, the brahmana Srutadeva and the king in Mithila knew their Lord had come to bless them, and they also came to him and, prostrating, laid their heads at Krishna's dark and sacred feet.

It now happened that, at the same moment, in the same breath, the brahmana and the king both invited Krishna and the Rishis who had come with him, to stay with them.

The smile never leaving his face, Krishna did not hesitate a moment, but accepted both their invitations, for he had indeed come to bless them both. He assumed two bodies, each one a full and identical Krishna, and went with both Srutadeva and the king. However, using his maya, he made sure that neither knew that he had gone with the other, as well.

We presume, Rajan, that Krishna enabled the Munis also to be in two places at the same time. When the Avatara arrived in the palace of the king of Mithila, Bahulasva made Krishna and the Rishis sit upon lofty thrones for those were such holy Sages that evil men do not know or even hear their names!

With overwhelming love surging in his heart, tears coursed down the king's noble face. Crying for joy, he prostrated before the Lord, washed his feet, and poured that water, which sanctifies the universe, over his own head and the heads of the members of his family and the rest of his sabha.

He then worshipped Krishna with every auspicious offering – sandalwood paste, garlands of flowers, fine garments, ornaments – waving lamps and burning incense before him, and by giving him the finest cows and bulls in his kingdom.

He fed the visitors sumptuously, making warm and pleasant conversation, until they could not have another morsel. Then he sat at Krishna's feet and took those dark and divine feet onto his lap, and stroked them in absolute joy.

The king of Mithila hymned Krishna, 'Pervasive One, you are the Atman, the Antaryamin, in every creature, the universal witness, the self-luminous light of consciousness, and the final object of existence. And today, you have revealed yourself to us, who have adored your lotus feet – you who cannot be seen with human eyes have taken this mortal form and come here to this world, why, to our Mithila!

Often, Lord, you have said that not your brother Anantasesha, the Lord Balarama, not your eternal consort Sri, or your children are as dear to you as a devoted bhakta. It seems to me that by coming here today you have proven that you meant what you said – by appearing in this mortal world in a human form, O eternal, invisible One, and by visiting us, your bhaktas in Mithila. What could be more wonderful?

Who will leave your feet like lotuses? We all know that you are yourself the gift you make to the Munis who have no other wealth or possessions other than you.

You have incarnated yourself in the house of Yadu, and by your magnificent lila, your divine play and deeds, your fame has spread across the Earth – the renown that men listen to and are set free from the bonds of samsara, and find moksha.

I salute you, Krishna, Lord, who are pristine and perfect consciousness, never touched or tainted by the darkness of ignorance. I worship you, who are Narayana and forever absorbed in uninterrupted samadhi, contrary to any appearances.

Immanent One, I beg you, remain here with me for some days, you and these holiest of Rishis, and bless the line of Nimi with the padadhuli from your holy feet.'

Thus, King Bahulasva of Videha implored Krishna and he who always blesses the world readily agreed. He spent some days in Mithila, in the palace, and incalculable was the grace and blessing that he brought to that country, that city, and its ruler and its people."

Suka Deva continued, hardly pausing to draw breath and his eyes shining, for, of course, he had been there himself on that occasion, "When Krishna came to his home, the Brahmana Srutadeva also prostrated before the Lord and the Rishis with him, quite as the king had done.

Then, he danced for the Avatara, spontaneously, whirling about, and his clothes with him, with untold love and vigour. Now he offered them darbhasanas upon which to sit, and soft mattresses, then made them welcome with padya, washing their feet with deep reverence, as did his wife.

The pious brahmana sprinkled the water with which he had washed the Lord's feet over his own head, all over his house and over the heads of his family, all those that lived under his humble roof. Incomparable was his joy, for this was his most cherished ambition.

Srutadeva adored Krishna with offerings of fruit, incense, water made fragrant with wild herbs, tulasi leaves, kusa grass, lotus petals, and other natural and cheaply procured, but very auspicious articles of worship. He fed him a simple, clean, and tasty meal.

All the while that he worshipped the Avatara, the brahmana wondered how Krishna and the holiest Sages in creation, in whom the God of gods dwells, the touch of whose feet sanctifies even the most sacred tirthas, had come to visit him – a man enmeshed in the snares of grihasta, a householder's life.

Once the rituals of welcome were over, and his divine guests sat in comfort, the brahmana, his wife, and the other members of his family sat at their visitors' feet, stroking and massaging them – in wonder, humility, and ecstasy.

In a while, Srutadeva said, 'No, it is not only now that you have revealed yourself to us. Why, in the Beginning, at the dawn of time, you entered into the myriad kinds of creation, which your Shakti brought into being.

When a man is asleep, his dreaming mind creates, projects various selves and dreams of their experiences. The sleeper permeates all these, in essence, with his light of consciousness. So, too, you illumine this universe, created by your maya, both as the jivas, who experience creation, and the objects and time that they experience, or appear to.

Most of all, you illumine the pure hearts of your bhaktas, who always speak of you, listen to your legends, worship you, and speak about you among themselves – your devotees who prostrate themselves, their lives, at your feet.

While it is true that you are in the hearts of everyone, you are yet distant for those whose minds are absorbed in karma. You can never be fathomed by any mind, alone; only a mind steeped in bhakti melts into you, and understands your glory, your infinite love.

I salute you who reveal yourself as the Paramatman to those who plumb the knowledge of the Atman. I adore you, who come as Death to those that do not see themselves as being the Atman, but perceive their separate bodies as being their selves, their souls.

I salute you who are Prakriti embodied and everything that evolves from the seed of nature: the causative and manifest aspects of the universe. I prostrate before you, whose vision is never obscured by maya, which plunges all else in ignorance.

We are your servants, O Lord; be pleased to teach us. Tell us how we can serve you. Ah, the sorrows of men cease to be as soon as they find you, realise who you are!'

Thus Srutadeva, the humble brahmana bhakta, spoke to the Avatara who removes the pain of his devotees that surrender to him. Krishna fondly took the brahmana's hand, and said, 'Wise, most learned one, these holiest Rishis have come with me to bless you. They range the face of the Earth, bearing me in their hearts, and sanctifying every place to which they go with the padadhuli from their feet.

Sacred idols, the tirthas and holy rivers take a long time to purify men who see, touch and worship them. Also, the power of all these is derived from the Rishis who gaze upon them with their mystic eyes.

A true Rishi is greater than other men because of the deep and varied punya he brings with him into the world. He develops this punya with dhyana, gyana, by contentment, and, more than these, by the bhakti he has for me.

This four-armed form of mine is no nearer to my real Self than the Muni. The true Muni embodies the Vedas, while I am only an avatara of the Devas, whose greatness rests and depends upon the Veda.

Only evil, discontented and ignorant men exalt the stone and earthen idols of the earth above her Maharishis. These Sages are the true Gurus; they are all my own Self; they are the Atman of all beings.

The Muni is always aware that the universe in both its sukshma and sthula forms, its material and archetypal conditions, is my Rupam. They have this awareness because I illumine their hearts and minds with spiritual intuition.

So, I say to you, most learned Srutadeva, worship these holy men with the same fervour that you adore me; invest in them the same faith. This is what I consider true worship, and not offerings of gold and ornaments given to the stone idols in the shrines of the world.'

Krishna spoke simultaneously, in different places, to the king and the brahmana, and his awesome grace and light entered their spirits. Both now worshipped the Rishis and the Lord, making no difference between the two, and brahmana and kshatriya attained moksha.

O Parikshit, thus Krishna showed that he is truly a bhakta of his bhaktas, and he showed the king and the brahmana the way of the spirit as laid down in the Veda. He remained with them a few days, in two bodies, and then returned to Dwaraka."

THE VEDAS

THE KING PARIKSHIT ASKED, "ILLUMINED SAGE, THE VEDAS ARE comprised of words; surely, they can only describe beings that fall within the scope of the gunas. How can the Veda reveal the Brahman, which transcends the gunas of Prakriti, which is without a second, beyond karma, and Absolute?"

Sri Suka replied, "Prabhu, the Godhead, gave jivas minds, intellects, senses and prana, so they could enjoy the world, perform their dharma in it, find punya and the joys of Swarga by these, and finally attain moksha, freedom from samsara.

We must not doubt the Veda; it is the embodiment of the knowledge that destroys ignorance and brings the jiva to the Brahman. From time out of mind, the most ancient days, the Maharishis have accepted this truth. There is no doubt that he that accepts the Veda with faith and humility, and lives a life of relinquishment, attains to the final Godhead, to the Parabrahman.

To illustrate what I am saying, let me tell you about what happened when Narada Muni went to visit the incomparable Rishi Narayana; it is a conversation that occurred between the two.

Once, during his ceaseless wanderings across the universe, Narada, whom the Lord loves, came to Mount Badarikasrama, to visit the Rishi Narayana, who performs a tapasya of dharma, gyana, and samadhi – a penance that lasts an entire Kalpa, to bless the men of Bharatavrasha, materially and spiritually.

Narayana sat surrounded by other Sages, in the village called Kalaapagraama, and Narada asked him the same question that you have asked me. In reply, Narayana related a tale of old about something that happened during a yagna held in Janaloka by the ancients, when many great ones discoursed upon the Brahman.

Narayana, the Blessed One, said, 'Son of the self-born Brahma, it was in Janaloka that a long discussion on the Brahman took place, and the patrons of the assembly of the wise were the mind-born and immaculate sons of Brahma, they that are celibates all their lives. Many of the greatest Munis, whose senses and minds are quiescent, were present in that lofty world, when the discussion upon the Bramashastra took place.

You, Narada, had gone to pay homage to the Lord Aniruddha in his realm, Swetadwipa, the white continent. And the subject of the profound discussion was the very question that you have raised today.

The Rishis present were all equal to one another in wisdom, but they made one among them, the glorious Sanandana, the main speaker and the others listened to his discourse with perfect attention.

Sanandana said, "Come dawn, and the minstrels and bard of his court arrive to awaken their sleeping emperor. They come singing his praises, and recite his magnificent deeds. Similarly, the Pralaya ended and the Lord had to be awakened from the cosmic slumber into which he had fallen when the last Kalpa ended, withdrawing the universe, all creation back into himself. It was dawn in the Cosmos, and like an emperor's bards and minstrels, his vabdhis and magadhis, the Srutis, which are the Vedas, came and sang a hymn praising Mahavishnu, and all his majesty.

The Srutis sang, 'All hail, O final Master, invincible One! Be gracious, and manifest your transcendent Nature again. Be pleased to illumine the avidya of all the jivas, mobile and unmoving; remove the shroud of your maya from them. In you, the shroud is no veil of ignorance as it is in the jiva, but part of your nature of infinite love and your divine grandeur. The Veda speaks of you as alternately manifesting yourself as creation, and then becoming perfectly absorbed in yourself again, by withdrawing your maya, and becoming immaculate, still.

Ultimately, the universe of experience is only you. The Vedas and the Rishis know that when everything else ceases to be, only you continue to exist. Even as objects fashioned of clay finally return to their original condition of being clay, so too the universe and everything in it returns to its original substance – you, Lord, you. The beginning and the end of the universe occur within you. Yet, while by becoming, say a pot, the clay itself is transformed, you remain unchanged even when you create, nurture and dissolve the universe.

Everything that is conceived by thought and which the senses experience is only your self. All the Devas and the various forms of worship described in the Vedas are only you, perhaps indirectly. When we walk, our feet appear to land on many objects, but all the while, they fall on the Earth, since Bhumi is the support of every object. Similarly, the Vedas might appear to prescribe the worship of multifarious deities, yet all that is in the sacred books only worships you, and shows the way to you.

Lord of Prakriti, the Maharishis realised that all the Devas and the Avataras are only your self, and plunging into the ocean of the sacred legends of your incarnations and your deeds, cooled the heat of their grief and suffering. What then to say of those who pass beyond space, time and the limited mind, and find with direct intuition your Being? Surely, they become part of you and leave suffering behind them for ever. Theirs becomes a condition of uninterrupted, eternal bliss.

A man is a man, and truly alive, only if he loves and worships you. Else, he is a mere bellows, a lifeless thing that breathes. You are the force that quickens the insentient elements, and transforms them into the living and intelligent universe; and man, as well. And in the human being, thus fashioned, you are the Purusha, the soul immanent in the five sheaths, the five material and subtle bodies – the annamaya, the pranamaya, the manomaya, the vijnanamaya, and the final anandamaya. You permeate all these, you are their very forms, and yet you remain beyond them in essence – the ultimate residue, indivisible, when every other division of cause and effect have been exhausted.

Brahmam puccham pratishta – Brahman is the tail, the fundament.

The coarsest of those that follow the way of the Rishis, the Saarkaraayanas, meditate upon the chakra in their bellies – the manipura and probably the anal muladhara – as being the home of the Brahman.

Those more evolved, who follow the subtler path of Aaruni, meditate upon Brahman as residing in the cavity of their hearts – the dahara or anaahata chakra.

The still more evolved follow the path of the sushumnaa, the spiritual way that leads up from the heart to the crown of the head and the sahasraara chakra, the Lotus of a thousand petals, in which you actually dwell. The Sages that attain this chakra nevei return to birth and death.

You are the cause of all the living, yet you enter into them again, assuming many shapes and forms, even as fire does with fuel. Fire is always dormant, inherent in fuel, but assumes flames big and small according to the size of the wood it consumes. Yet, Fire itself is always singular and one. Men of clear discernment, who desire no reward for their karma either here or in the hereafter, realise you as being the only reality, single, immanent, pure, and unchanging in all these fleeting, dying forms in Nature.

The jiva, the Atman that dwells in every body and being – all fashioned by their karma of previous lives – is never bound or limited by any karma, even in the thick of samsara, its causes and effects. This soul is an amsa, a ray of you, who are the totality of everything, the entirety, you of infinite compassion and divinity. Wise men understand this, and worship you in this world with unflinching faith and bhakti. They know that all the dharma described in the Vedas must be offered only at your feet; they meditate upon these holy feet and find moksha, freedom from the bondage of samsara. For they know that devotion is the way to that eternal freedom.

Lord of the universe, you come into the world in various Avataras, to illumine this spiritual nature of man, which is difficult to discover or understand. There are men that plunge into the legends of these incarnations of yours, to the exclusion of every other spiritual endeavour. They leave their homes and all their attachments, and become part of the community of renunciates known as the Paramahamsas, the swans of the spirit, and they play in endless delight at the great lotus of your feet. These abjure even apavarga – moksha. They renounce the fourth purushartha, choosing instead the fifth, which is premabhakti, worshipping you with love.

The human body is so beautifully suited to adore you, Lord – always available, like the dearest friend or kinsman, to use in your service. And you, the Antaryamin, the soul of every soul, always loving, are only waiting to bless your bhaktas.

Sadly, most men prefer to indulge their senses in pleasures that only degrade them, make them wretched. A man neglects the life of bhakti, and unwittingly becomes as a murderer of his own Atman, his true destiny. Snared helplessly by the karma accumulated and strengthened by lives of being attached to his body, he devolves and wanders the dreadful catacomb of samsara, even in bestial forms.

Those that chose enmity with you found the same sanctuary as the Sages that restrained their senses and minds, and sat in dhyana, with their hearts fixed only upon you. For you, we, the Sruti Devatas, who see you as being omnipresent and are in constant communion with your sacred feet, and the gopikas of Vrindavana that always longed to be clasped in your arms, as beautiful and strong as the coils of Adisesha, are equal. Any bhakti, whatever form it takes, if it is passionate and absorbs the bhakta in the thought of you – you bless your devotee with your grace.

You are the Primordial One, beside whom there was no other. How can the rest, all of which originated from you and after you, and will finally dissolve into you, ever fathom you, or your utmost mystery? You created Brahma, the Creator, and he made the two races of unearthly beings, one dark and one bright.

And when you enter into your cosmic sleep, recalling the universe into yourself, nothing remains that might be called creation – nothing sthula, nothing sukshma, nothing that is a combination of both. There is no time, then, and no scripture. How will anyone know about you unless you teach them yourself, Jagadguru?

Thus, to live in bhakti and to seek your grace is the easier and superior path a man might tread toward salvation.

There are almost as many views of what reality is as there are philosophers that expound them. The Vaiseshikas say that the universe evolved from a condition of non-existence; the Nyayikas believe that moksha occurs when the twenty-one different kinds of suffering cease. The Samkhyas believe that the Spirit is myriad, as diverse as there are bodies; they say every soul is distinct, that there exists a plurality of souls. The Mimamsas have it that the fruit of all karma, and especially ritual karma, is entirely real.

All these are at best partial conceptions of the truth, inadequate sophistries. So is the theory of the material philosophers who propagate the lie that man is merely a product of the three gunas of Prakriti, and that each individual is a separate and unconnected being, and perishes when his body does.

None of these takes into account your nature, and that you, who are pure consciousness, in whom no avidya or darkness exists, are the only Truth.

The universe and the jivas in it are fundamentally asat, having no reality of their own; they only come into being, Sat, because you invest them with your substance. The Rishis know that all that exists is indeed Sat, and only because creation is an expression of you – just as a golden ornament is precious because it is made of gold.

You create the universe, and dwell in it as its reality, its essence. Men that worship you as the soul of all existence, conquer death; why, they plant their feet on his head, even as if in contempt. The rest, who do not recognise this basic truth, even the most erudite scholars, are bound like beasts to samsara by the rope of Vedic ritualism.

Men who love you purify the worlds, but never those who assume the pretence of being masters of the spirit but do not enshrine you in their hearts.

You are the self-illumined, Self-conscious One; you may have no limbs or indriyas, but you are he that is the cause and the support of every creature and all their faculties. Ruled by your maya, the Devas and the Prajapatis offer you tribute, even as lesser kings do their emperor. These lesser Gods thrive on the yagna offerings of mortal men. From fear of you, the Devas perform the dharma that you have ordained for them.

You, O Lord, are forever beyond the shackles of maya. Yet, when you merely cast your glance upon her who has no beginning, in divine play, all the jivas are enlivened, and their sukshma rupas, too, their spirit bodies – all of whom you reabsorbed into yourself at the end of the Kalpa. That very glance at Prakriti brings the worlds back into being, and the creatures mobile and unmoving.

All jivas return and each is unique because of past karma. You, the Highest, however, make no difference between any of them. Like akasa, subtle beyond mind and words, you are the same toward every being, favouring none. Only their karma creates varying destinies for them.

Eternal One, if the jivas were truly countless, each eternal and pervasive – as the Samkhyas claim – they would not be under your control. Each one would be his final master. Only if the truth is otherwise, and every jiva an amsa of you, would you in fact control them. Then you would be immanent in them, through their every manifested change, while remaining unaffected, changeless yourself – the Supreme One.

You are the pervasive, ubiquitous, omniscient and ultimate Seer; you cannot become an object of knowledge, comparable to any other. To think of ultimate Reality as being observed by another is a foolish and impossible conception.

No jiva is a creation of only Purusha or exclusively Prakriti. Both these principles, male and female, Soul and Nature, are eternal; creatures come and go. Thus all the created are a composite of both, marvellously complex and subtle, so the two principles can hardly be distinguished from each other. They are like bubbles, in which water and air combine indistinguishably.

When, finally, the jivas all dissolve into you, either in moksha or in the cosmic slumber after the Pralaya, then they are no longer apart from you. Only, those that melt into you in moksha are rivers that flow into the ocean and become one with it, while those that merely sleep still retain, in sukshma rupas, subtle and latent forms, many karmic tendencies – rather as honey does the nectar of many different flowers.

The Sages know that jivas bound in your maya are born repeatedly, and die also again and again, caught in the wheel of samsara, of transmigrations. And these wise ones worship you, who alone are the deliverer, with fervid bhakti. There is no samsara for those who serve you. The wheel of time, with its triune rim of past, present and future, holds terror only for those that do not seek refuge in you.

O Un-born, men that restrain their minds and their senses but do not yield in their hearts at the feet of the Guru, find no peace but the deep sorrow of failure. The mind is like a wild horse, and only your grace can finally tame it; all other efforts merely fetch the pain and frustration of vain striving. The man that hopes to find his way to freedom without the grace of the Guru is like a party of merchants upon the high seas, with no helmsman to steer their ship to safety.

What will a man do with his kinsmen, his sons, his wife, wealth, home, lands, all his possessions, his body and his life, when with surrender he can have you, as his very self, who are the innate and infinite ecstasy? What joy does the man achieve that relentlessly pursues the trifling pleasures of the flesh and this world, when he does not strive to know you, who are the foundation of existence and the embodiment of bliss? The pleasures of the senses are hollow, fleeting gifts, and all wrapped in death.

Your bhaktas abandon hearth and home and seek out asramas of seclusion, lives of dhyana – though they are free from pride and ego, though they clasp your lotus feet in their hearts, and the purifying river of faith, which springs at your feet, flows always through their hearts.

Those that have even once seriously sought the Atman, which you are, are never again content with the selfish husk of a householder's life – the life that is a scourge to the spiritual in man. The wise leave their homes, roam the earth, and find the grace of the tirthas, which renders them holier than they were before.

Some metaphysicians claim that this world is founded in Sat, reality, and so it is also real, and Sat. Yet, this logic is specious. Consider a father and son; they have different identities, and the son cannot become his father just as a pot cannot the clay of which it is made. The cause and the effect, God and creation, are not the same or equal.

Also, creation, an effect, is only an appearance projected upon you, the cause. It is an illusion, like a rope appearing to be a snake. In both these instances, we find that the effect is not as real as, or identical with, the cause. At best, the idea might continue in currency for a while, by general acceptance, even as a bad coin does without ever becoming genuine. One day, it is certainly shown up for what it is.

The idea that the fruit of performing Vedic rituals are permanent is as false as the bad coin. It is propagated by dimwitted men, of mechanical minds, who do not begin to understand the true import of the Vedas, which is many-layered, profound, and single, being comprised of your holy word. It is true that Vedic rituals might bear fruit that last long, even an age, but they are not eternal.

The cosmos did not exist before creation, and it shall cease to be after the Pralaya. Thus, its coming to be in you, the Satchitananda, is like a shadow play, without true substance. Truly, the universe is like golden jewellery or earthen vessels, which return inevitably to gold and clay. Only the ignorant mistake these evanescent formations, these illusions of the mind, to be permanent.

Your maya deludes the jiva, and he begins to identify himself with his body and mind. He loses his inherent nature of infinite ecstasy and becomes a victim of birth and death in the cycle of transmigrations, of samsara.

You who are for ever established in your glorious Atman are never touched by ignorance. You are like the serpent that has shed its skin, and shines forth in limitless grandeur, resplendent with the eight divine mystical powers.

There are Yogins who attempt to subdue their senses but never exorcise the roots of passion and desire from their hearts. These are hypocrites, and though you dwell in them, too, they have no access to you. For them you are as the diamond necklace upon the neck of the one that wears it but has forgotten that she does. They sate their senses, but are condemned to two kinds of grief – of death, which surely comes to them, and the sorrow of never knowing you, who will not reveal yourself to them.

Lord of numberless majesties, in the illumined man the fetter of selfishness, of the ego, is broken. He transcends your laws of karma – punya and paapa, virtue and sin – and its twin fruit of pleasure and pain. The laws set down in the scriptures for ordinary men, who identify themselves with their bodies, hold no meaning for him, or power over him.

The illumined man is absorbed in the eternal rapture of moksha, which is you. Every day, in every yuga, this truth of the devotional tradition of bhakti is propagated by the sacred lineage of Guru and sishya, the parampara of Mahatmans that flows through the generations of men.

Not Brahma fathoms you, or can discover your extent. You are limitless, and so, can never be measured or encompassed. Even you do not know your own infiniteness; within your being, countless universes, each separate, awesome in extent, and with its own seven sheaths, swirl through cosmic space like puffs of dust through the air: time being the force that makes them dance through endless space, within you. And so, the hymns of the Veda can never describe you adequately, and only tell what you are not: everything else that exists.'

Thus sang the Srutis to the sleeping Lord," said Sanandana,' the immaculate Rishi Narayana said to Narada. 'Raptly, the great Munis, mind-born sons of Brahma Pitamaha, listened to this exposition of the Brahman. The light of the Atman filled their hearts and they bowed to that Brahmarishi.

Thus, the ancient Muni Sanandana expounded the essence of the Vedas, the Puranas and the Upanishads – he, and the others that journey freely through space and time, from planet to planet, galaxy to galaxy.

And you, O Narada, heir to Brahmic bliss, consider deeply this teaching of those Sages, which causes relinquishment in the minds of men, and you also travel unimpeded through the universe!' "

Suka Deva said, "Rajan, Narada listened with perfect attention and potent faith to what the Rishi Narayana said. The celibate son of Brahma felt untold joy; again and again, he meditated upon the words of Narayana Muni.

Narada said, 'I salute you, O Divine Muni, who are an Avatara of the Lord Krishna, the Paratmatman of immortal renown, who incarnates, in forms of ineffable glory, from age to age, to bless the world and its creatures!'

Narada prostrated before that greatest of Sages; he paid homage to the disciples of Narayana, and repaired to the asrama of my father Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa. Vyasa Muni welcomed the wandering Narada with reverence, and offered him a darbhasana upon which to sit. Settling into that throne of grass, Narada related to my father what he had heard from the lips of Narayana. And I heard what I have just told you from Veda Vyasa.

This is the only answer to your question, O King – that the mind cannot comprehend the Brahman, which is beyond the gunas and beyond describing with words.

Always fix your heart in meditation of Hari; for, he is the creator and made the universe for the weal of its jivas. He is the immanent reality, the causes of causes, immutable himself, during creation, evolution, and the destruction of the cosmos. He is the Lord of the material worlds and of the spirits of the jivas, as well.

After creating the universe, he enters into it with the jiva, as the Antaryamin, the Indweller. He charts the course of the jiva through a myriad of lives and worlds, into countless species, births and rebirths. He is the master of evolution. He is the one that feeds the jiva, so the jiva might grow and attain to higher spiritual life.

Vishnu Narayana is the Guru, and he helps the jivas that seek sanctuary in him to transcend their sense of identification with their bodies – even while they are awake, as they do when they sleep.

He is for ever established in eternal Light; no ignorance or darkness comes anywhere near him. He embodies infinite Bliss, Satchitananda, and he can set men free from the bondage of samsara, and from all fear forever."*

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* The theme of the chapter seems slightly contradictory, in that the initial question does not appear to be answered.

THE TALE OF VRIKASURA AND RUDRA

RAJA PARIKSHIT SAID, "WE FIND, O SUKA, THAT AMONG THE DEVAS, Asuras, and men, the bhaktas of Siva, Parameshwara, who is a Yogin and dwells in places like crematoria, gain wealth and are given to the pleasures of this world. But not those that worship Vishnu, even though the Devi Lakshmi, his consort, is the Goddess of fortune.

This seems such a paradox – that the devotees of two Gods gain fruit that are contrary to the natures of Hari and Siva, why, even in direct opposition to their natures. Can you explain this to me, Swami?"

Sri Suka said, "Siva, who is always united with Shakti, possesses three aspects that pertain to the three gunas in Nature – sattva, rajas, and tamas. From this threefold nature of the Lord Rudra, the mind, the ten senses, and the five elements came to be. The Sivabhakta who worships any aspect of the Lord Rudra is blessed with powers and pleasures of all three aspects.

However, Vishnu is Nirguna, and he is not bound to any of the three essences of Prakriti. He is immaculate Spirit, and transcends Nature. He is a witness, who observes every transformation in Prakriti but remains untouched by them. The Vishnubhakta, like his Lord, transcends the gunas. He is rewarded with eternal bliss, not with any of the siddhis or pleasures of Prakriti.

When your grandsire Yudhishtira had performed his Aswamedha yagna, Krishna expounded dharma to him. During their conversation, Yudhishtira asked the very same question that you now ask me.

The Lord Krishna, who of course was the Parabrahman incarnated in the House of Yadu for the weal of the world, was delighted to hear the question.

Krishna answered your grandsire, 'I always deprive the man that I am going to bless of all his wealth. When his wealth is gone, his family and friends desert him, and he plunges into deep sorrow and despair.

He now gives his all to regaining some wealth. By my will, these efforts also fail. The spirit of dispassion fills his heart, and he seeks out other bhaktas, my devotees. Now, I bless this man, I bless him with moksha.

This is why men do not commonly worship me. I am sukshma, my nature Satchitananda, limitless, and inconceivable for the man whose heart is not pure. Few, indeed, are those that wish for the final fruit of the Atman, so most prefer to worship other Gods.

These Deities confer their blessings quickly, and their bhaktas receive kingdom, wealth and other tangible benefits from worshipping them. Yet, once they receive these gifts these men also become arrogant, and deluded. Soon, they forget themselves, so much so that they forget the God they worshipped, the one who blessed them with everything they came to possess.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva all have the power to both bless and curse their bhaktas. Brahma and Siva confer their boons quickly, and also their curses! There is a legend often cited by the Mahatmas, which tells how Siva once blessed the Asura Vrika and found trouble for himself.

Vrika was a fell Demon who, meeting Narada Muni once on his wanderings through the world, asked the Sage which of the Trimurti is most easily worshipped, which God is the quickest to grant boons.

Narada replied, 'Worship Rudra and you will receive the fruit of your devotion very soon. He is quickly pleased, but as easily offended. Ten-headed Ravana and Banasura eulogised the Lord Siva, even as minstrels do a king, and he gave them incalculable wealth and power, and indeed brought suffering upon himself.'

Vrika repaired to Kedara and lit a fire, which he adored as being Rudra's face. He cut flesh from his own body and offered it into this fire, as if giving it to Rudra to consume.

For seven days, Vrikasura worshipped Siva thus, and was dismayed when the Lord did not come to grant him a boon. He had offered almost his entire body into the fire of sacrifice, and on the seventh day he poured holy water over his head and picked up his sword to decapitate himself and offer his dripping head in the blazing agni.

Now Siva appeared from the sacrificial fire, his body brighter than the agni; gently he held Vrika's hand with the sword, and prevented him from beheading himself. The touch of the Lord's hands healed the Asura instantly; all his wounds vanished, and his body was whole again.

Rudra said, 'Noble Demon, enough of this tapasya. Ask me whatever boon you want. Why, I bless my bhaktas who merely offer me holy water. You need not mortify yourself so horribly. Ask and it shall be yours.'

Vrikasura did not hesitate, before asking. 'Let any being upon whose head I place my hands die!' He was evil, he had tortured himself unspeakably, and dreadful indeed was the boon he asked for.

O Scion of the House of Bharata, Siva heard this and was perturbed. The God laughed uneasily, but bound by his word, granted the Asura that boon. Surely, it was like feeding milk to a serpent.

Once he had his boon, Vrikasura's first resolve was to make Siva's consort, the Devi Gauri, his own. He reached out to use the boon Siva had granted him: he reached out to place his hands on Rudra's head!

Siva fled from the Demon, and in his heart he feared for the rest of creation, now that he saw how entirely dangerous Vrika was. Pretending to be afraid, Rudra ran to the corners of the Earth; he flew to the ends of the sky, the four quarters, and then fled north. Vrikasura chased him everywhere. Thus, Rudra prevented the Demon from using his boon to harm any other living creature.

Brahma, the Devas, and every living creature froze in fear, for none dared cross the Asura or attempt to save Rudra from him. Siva flew to Vaikuntha, Swetadwipa, loftiest of worlds, where no darkness ever comes.

In that blessed realm Vishnu Narayana dwells, manifest. Vaikuntha is the ultimate goal of all Sannyasins, renunciates whose hearts are steeped in shanti, in peace. For, no being that attains Vaikuntha ever returns to the lower realms.

Vishnu, the saviour, saw Siva in dire straits. Quickly, with his Yogamaya, he assumed the form of a brahmacharin and accosted Vrikasura. The brahmacharin wore a loincloth of munja grass around his waist, a deerskin across his chest; he carried a brahmana's staff and a rosary of rudraksha beads. He also held a sheaf of darbha grass in his hands. Vishnu, the brahmacharin, shining like fire, spoke to Vrikasura in the humblest tone.

'Ah, son of Shakuni, you are exhausted! It seems you have run a long, long way. Rest a while, noble one, for you should not strain your body like this. After all the body is the means by which one fulfils all one's wants; why, if cared for, the body yields the heart's every desire, even like a Kamadhenu, a cow of wishes.

I beg you, mighty one, tell me what you are after, if of course you think you might share a confidence with me. It is not uncommon for a man to achieve his ends by seeking the help of a wellwisher.'

So sweetly did that illustrious brahmacharin speak, in his voice like a shower of amrita, that Vrikasura felt his exhaustion leave him in a moment. Trusting the brahmacharin completely, he confided everything to him.

Vishnu the brahmacharin said with a knowing smile, and as sweetly as before, 'Oh, I fear Siva has deceived you! You cannot believe a word of what he says. You think of him as a great God, while he is now just a vile pisacha, after Daksha Prajapati cursed him. Rudra is only the king of bhutas and pretas, and the ghosts and goblins are his only followers.

Greatest of Asuras, my dear friend, if you still believe in Rudra's boon, I suggest you do not exhaust yourself anymore by running after him, but test what I have told you by setting your hands on your own head. You will discover how false Rudra is, and then you can kill him with your sword so he does not deceive anyone else as he has deceived you.'

Enchanted, deluded by Vishnu's hypnotic voice and words, the foolish Vrika put his lethal hands on his own head and, of course, fell dead with his head cloven, as if it had been struck by Indra's Vajra. Heavenly voices sang Vishnu's praises from the sky, saying 'All hail!' and 'We salute you!'

When Vrikasura died, the Devas, Rishis, Pitrs and Gandharvas flung down showers of petals and the blooms of Swarga, and the Lord Siva was saved from a perilous predicament.

Now Mahavishnu said to the relieved Lord of the mountains, 'Mahadeva, the Demon's own sins consumed him, for who can ever hope to find happiness if they harm any of the holy, let alone offend Mahadeva Jagadguru?'

He that tells or listens to this legend of how Vishnu – the Paramatman in whom every divine power abides, who is beyond the ken of the mind – rescued Siva from Vrikasura: that man will be freed from his enemies, and one day from the wheel of birth and death. He will come to moksha," Sri Suka said.

THE BRAHMANA'S CHILDREN

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "O KING, ONCE SOME MUNIS BEGAN A SATTRA, a sacrifice upon the banks of the golden river Saraswati. A point of contention arose among them: which of the Trimurti, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, is the greatest God.

Rajan, the Rishis gave the task of discovering the truth to Brahma's son, the Maharishi Bhrigu. Bhrigu arrived in his father Brahma's unearthly sabha.

To test Brahma, Bhrigu did not prostrate before the four-faced Creator, nor sing any hymn of the Pitamaha. At once, Brahma blazed up in anger, and shone more brilliantly than ever.

But seeing that the one who gave him offence was his son, Brahma restrained his fury, even as water does fire – water that has evolved from agni.

Bhrigu left Brahma's court and flew to Mount Kailasa, where Siva dwells. Seeing the Sage, Siva rose in delight and came forward to embrace Brahma's son like a brother.

Bhrigu shrugged off Siva's embrace, saying, 'You are a heretic and tread an evil path. Do not embrace me, for you flout the Vedas, and smear yourself with the ashes of the dead.' Siva's eyes turned the colour of fire and, seizing his trisula, he came roaring to strike Bhrigu down.

But the Devi Parvati fell at her Lord's feet and begged him to spare Bhrigu; she pacified the wrathful Rudra with soft words. Now Bhrigu flew to Vaikuntha, where Vishnu dwells.

He found Vishnu lying on a bed with his head on the lap of the Devi Lakshmi, absorbed in her and she in him. Bhrigu went up to Narayana and kicked the Blue God on his chest. Vishnu, Brahmanyadeva, sanctuary of Sages, rose, smiling, as did the Devi Sri, both of them serene.

He climbed down from his lofty bed, and prostrating before Bhrigu, said to him, 'Welcome Mahamuni! Sit here, my lord, and pardon me for not noticing that you had come.'

He made Bhrigu sit on his fine bed and began to massage the brahmana's feet. 'Ah Muni, you have such delicate feet and my chest is so hard that I fear you have injured yourself.

Swami, I beg you, purify me, the worlds that dwell in me and their ruling Devas, by allowing me to wash your feet whose touch sanctifies even the tirthas. Ah, from today, the Devi will abide forever in my breast, for all my sins have been washed by the touch of your sacred foot.

Let this auspicious mark on my chest made by your foot be called the Srivatsa, the beloved of Lakshmi.' And so it was.

Uncanny rapture overcame Bhrigu to listen to what Vishnu said, and to his deep, mellifluous, and perfect voice. Tears streamed down the Muni's face, and he stood there wordlessly, unable to speak, bhakti surging through his heart in tide.

In a while, Bhrigu flew back to the place where the Rishis, who were masters of the Vedas, were performing their sattra. He told them of his experiences with the Trimurti. They were amazed at what he said, and concluded that Mahavishnu is indeed the highest God, the wellspring of peace and fearlessness.

Dharma has its origin in Vishnu Narayana, as do wisdom, renunciation that is founded in true knowledge, and the eight mahasiddhis. His are the legends, listening to which men are washed clean of their sins.

The Maharishis agree that he is the final goal of all Sannyasis that do not prey upon their fellow beings, who are at peace with the universe and everything in it, always imperturbable, who have no possessions, but are blessed with universal love.

Narayana is he that always reveals himself in a form of pure sattva. The Rishis are his objects of bhakti! All men who have no worldly desires, who are at perfect peace with themselves, and who have the finest discrimination – these adore Vishnu.

Maya – Prakriti with its three gunas – evolves so that Narayana might manifest himself in the three varieties of creation: the rakshasic forms in tamas, the asuric forms in rajas, and the daivik forms in sattva. Of these, only with the sattvika forms can the truly sacred be attained."

Pausing a moment, Sri Suka continued, "This was the conclusion at which the Rishis upon the banks of the holy Saraswati arrived – and this they preached to remove the doubts of men. Those Munis worshipped the Lord Vishnu with the deepest bhakti, and they attained him."

Thus said Sri Suka,' Suta Romaharshana says. 'He who journeys along the labyrinthine paths of samsara finds freedom from exhaustion, fear and sorrow if he sips from the cup of amrita that is this sacred *Bhagavata Purana*, which flowed from the lotus-like lips of Sri Suka, the son of Vyasa Dwaipayana.

Suka resumed his Purana. "King of Bharata, in Dwaraka a brahmana's wife gave birth to a child that died the very moment it emerged from its mother's womb and touched the Earth.

The infant's grief-stricken father took his child's little corpse to the sabha in the Sea City, and laid it at Krishna's door. He sobbed, 'My child has died because of the sins of arrogant and evil kshatriyas, greedy beyond all measure, wanton and licentious, cruel, proud kings that persecute the Rishis of the world.

Poverty and misery without remedy is the lot of a people ruled by a tyrant, who has no self-control, whose heart is full of darkness, who oppresses them without mercy.'

The brahmana's wife gave birth again, and yet again, and the second and third children were also stillborn. These small corpses also the sorrowing brahmana brought to the doors of Krishna's sabha in Dwaraka and laid them down there, lamenting as before, full of reproach and blaming the sins of the kshatriyas of the world for the death of his children.

The brahmana's wife delivered more children, all of them dead at birth, and the brahmana brought them all to Krishna's sabha, and laid them at his door, sobbing and crying out again and again that the sins of the kshatriyas had killed his infants.

When he brought the corpse of his ninth baby to the sabha in Dwaraka, Arjuna was present in Krishna's court and he heard the lament of the brahmana. Arjuna said to the grieving man, 'Brahmana, do not rail against the kshatriyas of your land. Is there any warrior in this kingdom that even bears a bow? Why, to me the kshatriyas here seem like a sabha of brahmanas!

Kings that rule kingdoms where men have to fear for the safety of their wives, their children or their wealth are not worth calling kshatriyas. They are like actors, merely playing the roles of kshatriyas and kings, to earn a livelihood.

But I swear to you, holy one, I will protect the next child born to your wife and yourself. If I do not keep my word, I will burn myself to ashes in a fire to expiate my sin.'

The brahmana said, 'Not the mighty Balarama, Krishna, Pradyumna the magnificent archer, or the invincible Aniruddha has been able to save our children's lives. How will you accomplish what these divine ones, the very lords of the Earth, could not? Your promise is the hollow boasting of a callow youth. We do not believe what you say, O Arjuna.'

Arjuna replied, 'Brahmana, it is true that I am not Balarama or Krishna, nor am I a son or grandson of Krishna's. I am Arjuna and I wield the Gandiva, bow of matchless fame. I beg you, do not underestimate my prowess, which even Rudra praised. Even if I have to vanquish Yama, the Lord Death, in battle, I will restore your next child to you.'

The brahmana seemed satisfied, and went home with hope kindled in his heart after hearing what Arjuna said.

Came the time for his wife's next confinement, and the brahmana went to Arjuna. He was, of course, fearful that his tenth child would be born dead, as well. Arjuna went to the brahmana's home, purified himself ritually with holy water, prostrated in sashtanga namaskara with the Lord

Parameshwara in his mind, saluted the Gandiva, his divine longbow, and strung the weapon.

Now with subtle and awesome archery the Pandava covered the labour room with a net of magic arrows – above, on all sides, and below. The brahmana's wife delivered. The child cried lustily for a few moments, then vanished bodily into the sky!

Now the brahmana turned in anger on Arjuna, while Krishna stood there listening, too. The man cried, 'Fie on me, that I was idiot enough to trust the bragging of this eunuch! How can anyone else save a life that Aniruddha, Pradyumna, Balarama and Krishna could not protect?

A curse upon you, Arjuna, that you have broken the solemn word you gave me! Fie on your silly bow and upon your cruel perversity that made you swear to give us what fate never intended us to have.'

Roundly told off by the brahmana, Arjuna did not wait a moment, but using his mastery over the occult siddhis, flashed away to Samyamini, where the Lord Yama, sovereign of the dead, lives.

Arjuna did not find the brahmana's infant there, and he now flew to the worlds ruled by Indra, Agni, Nirriti, Soma, Vayu, and Varuna. Down into Rasatala he plunged, to Swarga, and many other realms high and subterranean.

Nowhere did he find the brahmana's child, and surely now he was indeed guilty of breaking his solemn oath. He built a pyre, lit it with an astra, and was about walk into it when Krishna appeared at his side and restrained him.

Krishna said, 'I will show where all the brahmana's children are. Do not blame yourself, certainly don't kill yourself, for, later, those that abuse and condemn us today will sing our praises.'

Krishna took Arjuna into his unearthly chariot, the Jaitra, and set out in a westerly direction. They flashed across the seven continents, the seven mountain ranges that form their boundaries, and crossed the seven oceans that separate the Dwipas. The climbed steeply through the air over the summit of the last and loftiest mountain, Lokaloka, and entered the absolute darkness that lay beyond it.

Bharatarishabha, in that complete night, Krishna's wonderful horses – Saibya, Sugriva, Meghapushpa, and Balahaka – faltered. The Lord Krishna, who bestows the fruit of their tapasya upon Yogis, flicked his wrist forward and the Sudarshana Chakra now flew before them.

The Chakra was bright as a thousand suns. Like the arrows that Sri Rama loosed at the army of rakshasas, that disk, quick as the mind, scattered the impenetrable darkness with its brilliant rays.

Flying on in the wake of the Chakra, suddenly Arjuna saw the Infinite Lustre of the Spirit, the Brahman that lay beyond the region of the darkness. It dazzled him, he shut his eyes, and his gaze turned inward.

Now they flew into an ocean, crested by tidal waves, and lashed by terrific winds. Arjuna saw a vast mansion before him, incomparable and supported by countless columns, all encrusted with sparkling jewels of size and colours that he had never seen before.

In that edifice, he saw Adisesha. Ananta was an awesome serpent. Two thousand glowing eyes shone upon his thousand hoods, each hood as big as some unimaginable crystal mountain, set with millions of huge jewels. Blue were his necks, and so were his tongues.

Upon the coils of that immeasurable serpent, Arjuna saw Mahavishnu, Purushottama, seated serenely, his complexion blue like a thunderhead, wearing xanthic silk, his face beautiful and calm past describing, his eyes long.

The Pandava beheld Narayana with his wavy hair lit by the diamonds past compare that studded his crown and his earrings. Eight long arms the Lord had, the Srivatsa adorned his resplendent chest and the wine-red Kaustubha hung round his neck, as did the vanamala made of undying flowers.

Various servitors waited on Vishnu – led by Sunanda, the Sudarshana embodied, and by his divine powers: his strength, fortune, fame, his Maya and his eightfold cosmic Siddhis.

Krishna bowed to this other Form of his, in Godly sport. Full of transcendent excitement, Arjuna prostrated before the blue vision. The

God, the Paramapurusha, spoke in his vast voice, gently, to the two that stood before him, their hands folded.

'I brought the brahmana's sons here to my realm so that I might meet you both. You are my amsas, born into the world to rid Bhumi Devi of her burden of evil. Fulfil your mission quickly, and then return to me here.

You, noble spirits, lords of men, are the Rishis Nara and Narayana. You have no desires, yet you shall perform your karma on Earth for the weal of the world, of humankind, and to uphold Sanatana Dharma.'

Again, Krishna and Arjuna bowed before Vishnu Narayana – they would do as he wished, for what else had they been born? They saluted him, and returned happily to the world of men, bringing the brahmana's ten children with them.

Identifying those children by their age and form, they restored them to the brahmana and his wife.

As for Arjuna, his experience in the world of Vishnu, the untrammelled ecstasy and wonder of that experience, showed him that a man achieves nothing by his own effort, but everything he does is only by God's will and God's grace.

And Krishna, who was Vishnu incarnate, lived on Earth, as a man, enjoying the pleasures of the world, participating fully in its events. Yet, the powers he exercised were not human, but a God's. Numerous yagnas he performed, of many kinds, which would bless Bhumi in a myriad of ways, subtle and profound, long after Krishna himself had left it.

Even as Indra pours down the precious and plentiful rain, Krishna showered his blessings and boons over the people. They saw him and what he did, and they said he was great indeed, the greatest of all in their eyes.

To remove the Earth's burden of sin, he slew many arrogant kshatriyas himself, while many he had Arjuna and other warriors of light kill. Then, through Yudhishtira and his ilk, kshatriyas of truth, he established dharma in the world again, and saw that righteousness ruled."

KRISHNA, THE PERFECT

SRI SUKA SAID, "KRISHNA, THE LORD, THE DEVI LAKSHMI'S CONSORT lived joyfully in his Sea City, among the chieftains of the Vrishni clan. Dwaraka was renowned as a focus of learning and prosperity upon the Earth.

In Dwaraka, you saw lovely young women, graceful, beautifully dressed and adorned, their skins bright like lightning. You saw them playing games on the spacious terraces of their homes.

Through the streets of the peerless city, squads of colourfully clad royal guardsmen marched with some frequency. Splendid horsemen trotted their pedigreed, richly caparisoned steeds through those streets and high roads. Huge elephants lumbered along the avenues, and chariots with golden fittings trundled smoothly along the highways, carrying maharathikas.

Many parks and gardens that were so lovely they were dreams, dotted the Sea City. Various trees, laden with flowers through the year, lined the broad roads of Dwaraka, and across the city, everywhere, you heard the drone of the bees that sipped nectar from these and other flowers, and the songs of birds that perched in the branches of the trees of unearthly strains.

Here, in ineffable Dwaraka, God dwelt and sported with sixteen thousand, one hundred and eight consorts in as many magnificent mansions, assuming a different and identical form to be with all those women at once.

The palaces in which he kept the women stood in sprawling gardens, with enchanted lakes and pools, laden with every kind of water flower and bird. Their lucid surfaces bore the scents of kalhara, utpala, kumuda and kamala, blooming in profusion, and often unseasonably.

His dark body smeared with sandalwood powder from the breasts of his women, Krishna waded into the fragrant waters with his wives. He sported with them in the pools, tanks and lakes.

Music was always in the air, from various instruments played by masters of deep talent and inspiration. Mridanga, clay drum, and kettledrum wove deft and profound rhythms, while bards and heralds variously sang the praises of Krishna.

He played among his women, squirting water from pichkaris over them, and they over him; and other less frivolous sport he indulged in bringing forth cries from them! Ah, he was like Kubera, lord of the Yakshas, at play among his Yakshis.

Their saris were soaked, so their thighs and breasts showed clearly; their long hair hung loose and the flowers from those tresses fell onto the water. Wantonly they embraced Krishna, pretending to wrest the pichkari from his grasp, while in fact they pressed their lush bodies against him and their faces shone with the excitement of the lustfulness that Kama Deva brings.

Krishna wore a dazzling vanamala round his neck, that, too, bearing the sandalwood powder from the breasts of the women. His wild thick locks were loose and hung to his shoulders, glistening from being wet. He was like a bull elephant, a king of elephants, playing in musth with his cows. He sprayed water copiously over the women, and they over him, the women's laughter ringing in the sea air of Dwaraka.

When they finished bathing, they gifted away their wet clothes to the musicians and singers. While they were at this merry sport, the women's minds and hearts were absorbed in Krishna – his amorous ways, what he said, his teasing, his laughter, his eyes, his jokes, and his searing embraces.

Suddenly, the women would plunge into a mystic trance and stand as if graven of stone, speechless for ecstasy. Then, waking, they would begin to prattle again and to laugh, as if they were drunk, witless for the love of him.

Listen, Rajan, to some of what they babbled in euphoria.

'Osprey!' said one to a bird on her branch. 'The Lord has withdrawn his mind and his senses; he is in deep slumber. And you sob loudly through the night, disturbing him. Is this right? Or are you like the rest of us? And your heart cloven by his teasing glances out of the tail of his eyes. His smile!'

Said another, 'Chakravaki, your eyes are shut yet they leak tears through the night. Do you miss your husband, or is it Krishna you are crying for, because you yearn to be his slave like the rest of us, and wear flowers offered at his feet in your hair?'

Another called to the sea. 'Ocean, day and night you weep, never sleeping a wink. Are you like us as well – that while he churned you with his potent love, Mukunda deprived you of everything that you cherished? From us he took the kajal from our eyes, the saffron from our breasts, and the flowers from our hair. You are crying because he has taken your awesome majesty from you, and the Kaustubha and the Panchajanya, too!'

'O Moon!' cried another of Krishna's women. 'You look as if you are wasting from consumption. Ah, you look so wan, and your silver rays hardly pierce the darkness. It seems as if you, too, stand dazed and speechless, lost in remembering what Mukunda said to you.'

'Mountain breeze, Malaya, how have we offended you? You aggravate the wounds in our hearts, which Govinda has pierced already with his eyes.'

'O Cloud of the beautiful hue, you surely love the Lord of the Yadavas dearly and think of him all the time, as we do – the One with the Srivatsa upon his breast. Ah, you weep more, and louder than anyone! There is no doubt, dear cloud, that just the thought of him rends one's heart with such sorrow. Oh, then why do we stay so bound to him?'

'Kokila, koyal with the sweet throat, when you sing even the dying revive and think that they hear the voice of him who has the most enchanting voice of all! We want to reward you, most blest bird; tell us what you would have.'

'Mountain! You neither speak nor move at all; surely, you are absorbed in some fathomless dhyana. I warn you, beware if it is Vasudeva's son whose feet you want to feel upon your pointed peaks! For then your fate will be as ours is, who want to feel those feet upon our breasts.'

'Great Rivers, wives of the Ocean! We are emaciated and forlorn, our hearts empty and our bodies weak from missing the love in the eyes of the

Lord of Madhu. You, also, seem lean and dry from missing the sight of your lord. No lotuses float upon the trickles to which you have dwindled. Has your go-between, the rain, failed to do his dharma?'

'Swan, welcome! Have a little milk and tell us about our Krishna, our Sauri. We hear that you are his messenger. Is he in good health, the unvanquished and invincible one? Does the fickle fellow ever remember the love secrets he whispered to us once? If he does not, why should we wait for him in such longing and despair? He is not worthy of our love.

If he truly wants us, well, let him come to us himself, ah, he who can satisfy our every need. But listen well, O Swan, let him come without the Devi Sri! Is only she entitled to his loving? No, we all pine and ache for him! We have all given our hearts to him for ever.'

The consorts of Krishna were mad with love for him, out of their wits, and by this divine ardour, they found the highest spiritual condition. For he, of course, is the master of all those that have yogic powers.

Women who hear of him but once lose their hearts and minds to Krishna – his attraction is ineluctable. Then how can one describe the experience of those sixteen thousand who saw him every day, who shared his life in mystic Dwaraka, he of whom the greatest hymns and songs tell?

Ah; sacred they were – those fortunate women, who had the King and Guru of the universe for their husband! They stroked his feet and made love to him. How can anyone describe the splendour of this tapasya?

Krishna, who is the goal of all seekers, lived in Dwaraka as a grihasta. He followed the dharma of the Veda, and realised the three purusharthas of dharma, artha, and kama.

Sixteen thousand one hundred and eight consorts Krishna had in his Ocean City. I have already told you about the first eight of these – beginning with Rukmini – and the names of their children.

On every wife of his, Krishna sired ten children, and what wonder is there in this for he who is the Lord, and whose will is universal law. Of Krishna's sons and grandsons, eighteen gained great renown. Listen to their names.

They were Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Diptiman, Srutadeva, Bhanu, Samba, Madhu, Brihadbhanu, Vrika, Aruna, Pushkara, Vedabahu, Sunandana, Chitrabahu, Virupa, Kavi and Nyagrodha. These were all great kshatriyas and maharathikas.

Of the eighteen, Rukmini's son Pradyumna was the greatest and his father's equal in almost everything. Maharathika Pradyumna married Rukmi's daughter, and upon her, he fathered Aniruddha, who was as strong as ten thousand elephants.

Aniruddha married Rukmi's granddaughter. His son was Vajra, who alone survived the final slaughter in which all the Yadavas slew one another, with the blades of eraka reeds that grew from the iron pestle of the curse of the Rishis.

Vajra's son was Pratibahu; his son was Subahu, who sired Shantasena, whose son was Satasena. Know that no prince born into this line was ever poor, childless, shortlived, or lacking in the deepest bhakti for the holy Sages of the world.

Rajan, not in ten thousand years can one name all the princes born into this lofty lineage of the Yadavas, or describe their great and noble lives and deeds of exceptional heroism. I have heard once that thirty million eight thousand and eight hundred Gurus taught the prince of the House of Yadu!

King Ugrasena ruled Dwaraka, and millions and millions of Yadavas were his subjects. Countless Asuras were born into the world and they plagued the good people of the Earth. Vishnu told the Devas to be born in amsa as the Yadavas to kill the demons that overran the green world.

Among the Yadavas, there were a hundred and one clans. Hari himself incarnated as Krishna to unite and rule them all. They abided by the dharma he laid down for them, and they prospered beyond imagination.

In truth, the hearts and minds of these Yadavas of Dwaraka were so absorbed in the single thought of Krishna, that they were hardly conscious of their bodies, when they led their daily lives – lying down, sitting, eating, walking, conversing, playing, or bathing.

O King, the Ganga flows from Vishnu's holy feet and sanctifies the three worlds. But Krishna's lila on Earth and his fame have eclipsed the glory of the Ganga. The life and deeds of the Avatara purify the mind, as not even bathing in the most sacred river does. What is more, anyone can listen to the legends of Krishna.

Krishna gave sanctuary to all that came to him with intense feeling in their hearts – by either the way of love or that of hatred and enmity. He absorbed them into his Self, and they found eternal bliss, they found moksha.

The Devas all seek the favour of Sri Lakshmi, and she serves Krishna for he is the invincible, most majestic One. His very name removes the sins of those who chant it or even listen to it chanted with bhakti.

Krishna spread the diverse Vedic dharma across the world and down the ages: through the countless gotras of Rishis, the many spiritual clans. And what wonder is there that he achieved all this, he that wields the very wheel of Kaala? For him, it is surely a trifle.

Obeisance to Krishna, the Antaryamin and the abode of all the living! They say that he was born of Devaki, but he is the Un-born incarnate, the eternal, ancient One.

With the Yadavas around him, he razed the forces of evil, with his mighty arms. He saved all beings – the mobile and unmoving, the animate and the inanimate – from their sins.

The women of Vraja and Mathura looked at his loving face, they saw his dazzling smile, and they fell into divine love for him.

Anyone that wants to serve Vishnu Narayana, the Paramatman, and to find his salvational feet, must listen to the Purana of his Avataras, most of all when he incarnated as the Lord of the Yadavas. For these legends sever the bonds of karma that bind his bhaktas.

He came down to the world and did all that he did to preserve the Bhagavata Dharma, the way to moksha, which he established. The bhakta who regularly listens to the Purana of the Lord, sings it, or recalls Krishna's fabulous life and deeds: that devotee's faith grows day by day, until he attains to the very condition of the Lord and vanquishes death, which otherwise overwhelms all the living.

That is the condition to which kings aspire, when they renounce their kingdoms and retire into the wild hearts of jungles," Sri Suka said to Parikshit of the House of Kuru.

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Skandha 11

A FINAL TASK

SAID SUKA DEVA TO THE KING, “WITH THEIR MIGHTY YADAVA LEGIONS Krishna and Rama razed numberless Asuras born into the world as kshatriya kings and warriors. Finally, they stoked a ferocious feud among the different Yadava clans, and these slew one another, for otherwise they were invincible, Krishna’s own people. Thus the Avataras rid the Earth of her burden of sin and evil.

Krishna used his cousins, the sons of Pandu, as his warriors of light. Their cousins, the Kauravas, had provoked them repeatedly, humiliated them, sent them into exile, and generally sought to destroy them in a hundred ways. Krishna subtly set in motion a Great War between the two branches of that House of Kuru. Every king in the land of Bharata took one side or the other, and that Mahabharata yuddha saw such a vast slaughter that the very race of kshatriyas perished upon the field of Kurukshetra. Thus, Krishna rid Bhumi Devi of her burden of evil.

When this, his mission, the purpose of his being born, was accomplished, the Lord, whose ends are inscrutable, said to himself, ‘The Earth’s burden has indeed been made much lighter, yet not as much as it should be. The Yadavas remain alive, and the world shall not be safe from them and their arrogance and ambition, for there is none in Heaven or Earth that can curb their power.

They derive their strength from me, and no one can vanquish them in battle. The way to burn a bamboo thicket is to ignite a spark within it, so it is consumed by a conflagration from within. When I have taken the

Yadavas out of this world, then I, too, shall return to my home, my realm of peace.

The inexorable agency that Krishna then used to fulfil this final mission was the curse of some holy brahmanas.

Ah, what can one say about dark Krishna? He was more beautiful than everything else of beauty, and so anyone that saw him gazed on, enraptured. He spoke so divinely that anyone who heard him was instantly and absolutely fascinated; they gave him their hearts, their very souls.

The life he led, his splendid deeds – by these he inspired all men that even heard about him. He left an indelible imprint upon the fabric of time. For posterity, he lived a magnificent and sacred life, in every way, so his fame spread through the world and flowed down the ages, forever.

When he knew that he had done enough to create sufficient light to dispel the darkness of avidya in the human heart, he left this mortal world. Krishna went back to his eternal kingdom."

Raja Parikshit asked, bemused, "The Yadavas were Krishna's greatest bhaktas, the ones closest to him, the race absorbed in him always. How could they ever do anything that would bring down the curse of the Rishis upon them? How could they break dharma like that? Why, they were devoted not only to Krishna, but all Rishis and brahmanas, too. The Yadavas were always at the beck and call of the holy ones, like servants to their elders, renowned for their liberality and truth.

Mahamuni, what made the Rishis curse the Yadus? And what lit the spark that ignited the fire in which the Yadavas consumed themselves? For surely the Yadavas were renowned for their unitedness."

Sri Suka said, "Krishna was the entirely beautiful One, whose deeds are immortal legends that fetched weal to the world, who was always without desire, whose fame is matchless. He dwelt as a grihasta in Dwaraka, and, as I told you, even after the destruction of kshatriya kind at the war of the Kurus, Krishna felt his mission on Earth was incomplete.

A final task remained to him – the annihilation of his own, most powerful, and hence most dangerous, clan.

A few years after the Mahabharata yuddha, Krishna invited some Maharishis to perform certain rituals in Dwaraka, where he lived now in peace, radiating joy and sanctity through the land of Bharatavarsha. His presence in it purified the world.

When the Sages had finished the rituals and sacrifices he asked them to perform, he sent them to Pindaraka, a most sacred tirtha.

Among these Munis were Viswamitra, Asita, Kashyapa, Vamadeva, Atri, Vasishta, Narada, and others as profound and mighty. At Pindaraka, some Yadava youths, punchdrunk with the arrogance of their power and of being Krishna's own, and invincible, saw the Rishis and decided to have a little fun at their expense.

They made Jambavati's son Samba put on a woman's clothes, padded his belly to make him look pregnant, and brought him, head covered, before the holy ones. Keeping a straight face, one of the Yadava youngsters then asked the Maharishis, 'O Rishis of unerring vision, look kindly upon this lovely young thing. She is expecting a child and she wants to ask you a question, but she is too bashful to ask you herself and begged us to do so on her behalf.

Swamis, this young woman wants to know whether her child will be a boy or a girl, for she is keen to have a son.'

In their levity, the young men hardly expected the response they got from the holy men. In a voice like doom, the Rishis cursed them, 'Arrogant fools, she will give birth to an iron pestle and that pestle shall be the end of your clan!'

The Sages stalked away. The young Yadavas were terror-stricken by the ferocity with which the curse was delivered. They stripped away the sari in which they had wrapped Samba, tore away the padding round his belly and lo, they found a mysterious and glowing iron pestle within it.

'Hah!' cried those young men. 'What have we done? We have doomed all our people, how will they ever forgive us?'

Shaken, some of them with tears streaming down their faces, they ran back to Dwaraka, bringing the accursed pestle with them. They went straight to King Ugrasena in the Yadava sabha and confessed what had happened. However, no one dared tell Krishna about the Sages' curse.

The people of Dwaraka, all the Yadavas, heard what had transpired. When they saw the pestle, they were amazed and afraid. Ugrasena ordered for the pestle to be ground to a powder and for the powder to be scattered in the sea.

One piece of iron, however, could not be ground down; it was shaped like an arrowhead. This, too, was consigned to the waves and immediately a giant fish swallowed it. The rest of the ground pestle, the iron dust, floated upon the waves and was washed ashore, where, instantly, miraculously, it grew into a thick bank of silvery eraka reeds.

Meanwhile, the great fish that swallowed the sliver of the pestle fell, with many others, into the net of a fisherman. When he cut the fish open and saw the glowing triangle of iron, the fisherman fixed it to the head of his arrow, to be an arrowhead.

Krishna knew all this, and of course he could have prevented what was to follow, resultantly. However, the truth was that he was Kaala, the Spirit of Time, and he had himself set this chain of events in motion."

THE SERMON OF THE NAVAYOGIS

SAID SRI SUKA, "MAHARAJA, NARADA WAS ALWAYS ESPECIALLY ATTACHED to Krishna and very eager to be of service to the Avatara. So it was that, often, he would come to Dwaraka and remain there for some length of time.

Men are always at death's mercy. Which man that owns even a mote of common sense will not worship the holy feet of Krishna, who bestows moksha and whom even the Devas worship?

Once, the Rishi Narada visited Vasudeva's home. The Yadava elder welcomed the Sage with padya and arghya, made him comfortable in a fine chair, then asked, 'Swami, when a father and mother visit their child, it is always for the child's good. When a Maharishi visits, he brings relief from the pain of samsara.

Lord, you range over the three worlds and bring comfort wherever you go. The Devas sometimes bless mortals, but they can also bring down curses and suffering on men. But holy Rishis like yourself, whose hearts are always absorbed in the Lord – you bring nothing but blessings and peace.

Devas are under the sway of karma. They can only grant their blessings in exact proportion to the extent that they are worshipped with offerings – rather as a man's shadow always moving with him, never exceeding him. But the Munis are full of compassion for those caught in the torments of samsara; they are not bound by karma and give of their blessings as they choose.

Brahmasthapi, my lord, be all that as it may, I want to know what tapasya you performed, which Bhagavata Dharma you followed, that the Lord Vishnu favoured you with his grace. I believe with all my heart that by listening to your story with devotion a man can free himself from the wheel of lives and deaths.

I myself once worshipped Narayana – but not for moksha, only to beget a child. Ah, teach me now, Muni, so that I might also find freedom from this coil of delusion, full of terror and sorrow.'

Rajan, when the knowing Vasudeva asked Narada this, the Devarishi's mind filled with bhakti. Narada was in transport, his heart bursting with the infinite love and majesty of God.

Narada replied in joy, 'Noble, noble Yadava, you fill me with delight by asking me this rare question about the Bhagavata dharma, which sanctifies the very world. Even the most terrible sinners are washed of their sins if they listen to the Bhagavata dharma, holiest Way, if they extol it, meditate upon it, and preach it across the world.

Ah, my friend, when you ask me this my heart soars in rapture, for I think fervently of my Narayana, Lord of all, the most auspicious God, who purifies all those that speak his name or tell his fame.

Let me tell you of a great tradition, which involves a dialogue between nine sons of Rishabha the immortal, the nine known as the Navayogis, and King Janaka. In this, all the doctrines of the Bhagavata Dharma were expounded and elucidated thoroughly, with radiant examples.

Svayambhuva Manu's son was Priyavrata, who begot Agnidhra, whose son was Nabhi. Rishabha was Nabhi's son, and said to be an amsa of Narayana, who had incarnated to bring the Sanatana Dharma to humankind. Rishabha fathered a hundred sons, all of them masters of the Veda.

Bharata was the eldest, and he was a surrendered bhakta of Vishnu. This sacred land of ours was originally known as Ajanabhavarsha. It was renamed Bharatavarsha after the Rajarishi Bharata, son of Rishabha.

Rishabha enjoyed the Earth for a time, ruled sagely, then he relinquished his kingdom and his home, took Sannyasa in the forest, and abandoned himself to the worship of Hari. After three births spent in immaculate dhyana, Bharata attained to the Blue Lord.

Of the brothers of Bharata Muni, eighty-one became brahmanas and Rishis, who followed the way of the Vedic ritual. Nine of those that remained became kings and ruled nine kingdoms in Bharatavarsha.

Another nine became seekers after the Atman. Dhyanis and gyanis they became, and roamed the face of the Earth, naked, both seeking and established in the Atman. These nine were Kavi, Hari, Antariksha, Prabudha, Pippalayana, Avirhotra, Drumila, Chamasa, and Karabhajana. They ranged the world, seeing the Lord everywhere, both as sukshma and sthula, undifferentiated, the Universal Soul.

Their bodies did not limit them, and they went where they pleased, with never any obstacle in their path. As they chose they turned into every species they wished – Devas, Siddhas, Sadhyas, Gandharvas, Yakshas, manushyas, Kinnaras, Nagas, Munis, Charanas, Bhutanathas, Vidyadharas, birds of every kind, animals, insects and fish.

Once, they came upon a Brahmasattra in Ajanabhavarsha. It was a scriptural and spiritual conclave, which a host of Rishis had undertaken for King Nimi. When the Rishis, the king, and the deities of fire that flamed over the yagna saw the Nine, bright as suns, they rose in reverence.

They knew who these nine were – the Navayogis, incomparable bhaktas of the Lord Vishnu. Raja Nimi welcomed them with deep honour, and made them sit in comfortable seats, darbhasanas.

The Navayogis had assumed such luminous forms that they seemed to be Sanaka and the other Kumaras! In great joy and with wonderful humility, King Nimi of Videha spoke to them.

"My lords, you are verily the servitors of Mahavishnu himself! It is thus that I see you, O irradiant ones, and we are blessed that the messengers of the Lord range the worlds, purifying and sanctifying the three realms.

A human birth is a rare thing, and even when a jiva is born as a human being his life is brief. Ah, to meet God's greatest bhaktas during such a life is still rarer, and how fortunate!

Holy ones, since you have come here, and even a moment in your company is like finding a treasure, I must not miss this chance to ask you what truly contributes toward the final weal of a man.

Great ones, tell us about the Bhagavata Dharma, and the bhakti marga – for I have heard that Narayana becomes extremely pleased with those that follow this path; why, I have heard that he bestows his very self upon a devotee that follows this precious way."

Vasudeva, the Navayogis were pleased with King Nimi's question. They lauded him for it, and addressed their reply to the Raja, the Ritviks, and the entire gathering at that sattra.

The first Navayogi, Kavi, said, "When a man identifies himself with his body, thinking of it as being the Atman, he suffers the constant pain of samsara. For such a one to worship the holy feet of the Lord Narayana is the only way out of his torment, the only way to free himself from terror and agony, to find salvation.

For, certainly, the man that attains to the Lord is released from the fear of samsara forever.

So that the uninitiated, the unlearned, can attain to the Truth, the Lord Himself has revealed an easy path – that Way is the Bhagavata Dharma. O King, no obstacle shall appear to those that follow the golden dharma.

Let the bhakta of the Bhagavata Dharma have both his eyes bound – knowing neither Sruti or Smriti – yet he will not slip or fall as he makes his way along the twisting labyrinths of samsara.

The Dharma is simple. Everything that a man does while in his body – deeds, words, thoughts, everything influenced by his past karma – let him dedicate all this, his life in its entirety, to the Lord Mahavishnu, and make an offering of himself. This is the kernel of the Bhagavata Dharma.

The man whose mind does not seek God will not find true awareness of his Self. He will continue to identify his soul with his body, and from this delusion he shall be enslaved by every kind of desire and attachment. From these, fear of losing possessions and of death overwhelm his heart.

Narayana's maya causes this avidya and darkness, and only his grace can set a man free from it. Let the wise man serve God with whole-hearted bhakti, seeing His presence in the Guru, in the Devas, in every Deity, and in all beings, everywhere.

The world appears to exist apart from the observer, but this is only delusion, for the world by itself has no reality. The existence of the world is similar to a dream or a fantasy, entirely dependent on the mind of the dreamer.

Let the wise man restrain his mind, which projects the images that appear as a coherent external world; let him draw his thought inward, away from his senses and their ceaseless clamour of desires.

To find this restraint, let the wise man range the world, without forming any attachment for anyone or anything. Let him listen always to the legends of the Lord's lila, and unabashedly, with all his heart, chant the sacred names of Narayana, which tell of His divine deeds, his playful, wondrous sport.

The seeker that constantly chants God's names finds a great love burgeoning in his heart, a love that melts his heart into the Lord. He will often laugh or cry in the rapture of that experience, its wild ecstasy. Such a bhakta will chant or sing Narayana's names in transport; he will hymn His praises loudly, and at times, dance in divine madness, even as if drunk, forgetting the world outside, uncaring of it, knowing the bliss of the Lord.

Sky, air, fire, water, earth, the sun and moon, the stars and planets, all living creatures, the four quarters, trees, rivers and oceans – the bhakta sees these aspects of Prakriti as God's very body manifest. He worships them, prostrating himself, with intense, overwhelming bhakti!

The Bhagavata Dharma is wonderfully effective. A man eating good, nutritious food experiences pleasure with each ball of rice that passes his lips; he finds strength from what he eats, and freedom from hunger. So, too, the man who surrenders to Narayana finds intense bhakti, he experiences the Lord directly in bliss, and he attains to detachment from the objects of the senses, from samsara.

Rajan, the seeker who serves Achyuta constantly discovers devotion, detachment, and realisation of the Lord. Finally, he attains moksha, as well."

King Nimi asked, "Great ones, be gracious enough to describe a bhagavata to me, a true devotee. How does he live? What distinguishes him from other men? How does he behave? What makes him dear to God?"

The second Navayogi, Hari, replied, "A bhagavatottama sees the Atman everywhere, and in all creatures, as a part of the Lord, as having their being founded in Him, Narayana the soul of everything. A bhagavatottama is the finest and highest of bhaktas.

The next, slightly lower sort of devotee is the one that loves the Lord, is friendly toward his bhaktas, is kindly to those that are ignorant, and indifferent to his enemies. The lowest type of bhakta is the one that confines his worship to images and idols, to rituals, but shows no compassion or love for other bhaktas or his fellow beings.

He that relates to the objects of the senses, with the senses, but feels no pleasure or revulsion and is imperturbable, who sees the universe of the senses as Mahavishnu's maya – such a one is truly a bhagavatottama, the highest kind of bhakta.

The finest bhagavata, who ceaselessly experiences Sri Narayana, never falls prey to birth, death, hunger, fear, greed, lust, weakness and other failings that are inherent to jivas caught in transmigratory life. For these have their origins in the body, its senses, the vital forces, the mind and the intellect.

He is indeed a bhagavatottama in whose heart no desire stirs, or the karma that springs from desire, whose only sanctuary is Narayana, the Lord Vishnu.

He that has no arrogance of birth, of accomplishment, lofty status or spiritual evolution – such a humble and loving man is dearest to Vishnu. He that has no feelings of 'I' and 'mine', or 'you' and 'yours', no sense of differentiation about his body or his possessions, but feels only the ubiquitous presence of the Lord and is always serene – he is certainly a bhagavatottama.

The best of bhagavatas clasps the Lord's sacred feet – something even the Devas can only aspire distantly to – and not all the wealth in the three realms can then induce him to relinquish that grasp, not for a moment.

No passion has any sway over the heart of a bhakta, which has even once been touched and cooled by the moonlight of absolute peace that emanates from the toenails of the omnipotent Paramatman, whom he enshrines in his heart in dhyana. Once the moon has risen into the night, where is the scorching heat of the sun?

Vishnu burns up all the accumulated sins, from many lives, of those that call his name but once in true distress. What wonder, then, that the bhakta that binds himself with thongs of love to His lotus feet never finds the Lord missing from his heart.

Such a bhakta is, truly, the greatest among the bhagavatas of whom I have been telling you," said the Navayogi Hari to King Nimi,'

Said Sri Narada Muni to Vasudeva,"

Suka Deva told King Parikshit of the Kurus, while narrating the sacred *Bhagavata Purana* of the Lord Mahavishnu to him.'

Thus says Suta Romaharshana, foremost among the sishyas of the blessed Maharishi Vyasa Dwaipayana.

THE SERMON OF THE NAVAYOGIS

(*Continued*)

SAID SRI SUKA, "NARADA MUNI SAID TO VASUDEVA, 'KING NIMI SAID, "Tell us about maya, the power of the Lord Vishnu that binds the minds of men in delusion. Ah Masters, I listen to what you say about Sri Narayana and I am never satisfied.

I am a miserable mortal, trapped in the hell of samsara, tormented by the fear of approaching death, and your sweet words are like panacea to me, like immortal amrita."

A third Navayogi, Antariksha, said, "Valiant King, the Supreme One, the Soul of souls, the Origin, projected the first causes, the Tanmatras, and from these he fashioned the bodies of beings high and low. With these bodies, they experienced the fruit of their karma: pleasure and pain, joy and suffering. Also, using these bodies they worshipped him and found freedom from samsara, which is moksha. The power with which the Lord accomplished all this is his maya.

Having created living beings out of the five elements, the Panchamahabhutas, God enters into them by his power. He divides himself into the mind and the ten senses, and also creates the objects for the jiva to enjoy with the senses. This is the Lord's maya.

The jiva is, in truth, the Prabhu, God, the master of the body, indeed the lord of all things. He enjoys the world of the senses, which the Antaryamin manifests, projects it into time. From this enjoyment, the jiva falls into ignorance, and he begins to think that he is the body. He becomes attached to the body and suffers the torments of samsara. This is the maya of Mahavishnu.

The embodied jiva becomes embroiled in karma, and wanders in transmigration, from body to body, life to life, death to death, and he reaps the fruit of his actions – good and evil. This is, truly, the Lord's maya.

Until the very Pralaya, the jiva continues to wander from life to life, perpetuating his karma that takes him on with his organs and limbs of action. He lives and dies numberless times, until the very universe is dissolved. This, indubitably, is the Lord's maya.

When the great dissolution of the Tanmatras and the Panchabhutas draws near, Mahakaala, Time, withdraws the universe, both its material and spiritual aspects, its sthula and sukshma rupas, from the condition of being manifest. This, verily, is the Lord's maya.

Then there begins a hundred cosmic years of scorching drought, when no drop of rain falls, and the sun of the Apocalypse burns the world into a cinder, consuming it entirely. This is also the Lord's maya.

From the foundations of Patala, Adisesha shall spew immense tongues of flames from all his mouths. Blazing winds will span these, until they become a conflagration across the universe. This is the Lord's maya.

Then, the clouds of the Pralaya, the Samvartaka and the others, let fall the Deluge – each stream of rain as thick as an elephant's trunk. This awesome rain pours for a hundred cosmic years, and all the stars are extinguished and the universe submerged in the Great Tide. This is the Lord's maya.

Brahma, Creator, Lord of the universe, enters into the unmanifest, as fire does the essential principle of fire, when its fuel is exhausted.

Rajan, the element earth loses its property of smell and turns into water; water loses its fluidity and turns into fire; fire loses colour in the Samvartika darkness, in which the universe is plunged, and becomes air.

Vayu, air, loses its essence, touch, and merges into sky, akasa. The Kaalatman divests akasa of its essential characteristic, sound, and dissolves into Atman, the tamasic Ahamkara.

The Senses and the Intellect dissolve into the rajasika Ahamkara, and the mind and the deities that rule the senses are absorbed into the sattvika Ahamkara. The triune Ahamkara – of sattva, rajas, and tamas – is absorbed into the Mahatattva, from which they first emerged. The Tattvas now enter into Prakriti.

This, O King, is the Lord's maya, which bears three hues, three tints – sattva, rajas, and tamas – that cause creation and further, as well as destroy the universe. What else do you want to hear from us?"

King Nimi said to those splendorous ones, "Great Sages, tell me how even men with gross minds, who identify themselves with their bodies, can cross this maya of the Lord, which is hard indeed to escape for those that have not restrained their senses. Is there a path other than the way of bhakti?"

The Navayogi Prabuddha said, "Grihastas, householders, spend their lives trying to acquire happiness and to keep sorrows away. Yet, their ceaseless efforts, all their karma, meet with results quite contrary to what they wish.

Wealth only brings suffering to man – from the beginning, in the middle, to the very end. It is hard to acquire wealth, and when obtained brings misery with it, and even ruin. It is like another death. What real joy do house, lands, children, family, cattle or any possessions confer? They are all ephemeral, too.

Why, even the heavenly realms with their rarer delights are fleeting. They are attained by good karma, and when the punya is exhausted the jiva returns to the world. Moreover, these realms, too, are in their exalted way much like the provinces of petty chieftains under an emperor – there, too, you will find equals, with whom there is rivalry, superiors for whom there is envy, and always the fear of death.

Therefore, the man that wants to attain to the highest, immortal good, must find a Guru to instruct him – a Guru who knows the Upanishads and the Srutis, who has realised the Brahman, and who is established in peace.

Then, the seeker must think of the Guru as being his own self and his God. By humble and devoted service, he must learn from his master the ways of the bhaktas of the Lord, the Bhagavata Dharma, so that Hari, Lord of the universe, becomes pleased with him.

First, the seeker must renounce his attachment to the objects of the senses, and nurture in his heart an attachment for the company of holy men, instead. He must develop kindness, compassion, friendliness and humility toward his fellow men, as befits their individualities and circumstances.

He should be pure at heart, and in his body, perform his swadharma, cultivate patience, and avoid unnecessary talk. The seeker must study the scriptures, be honest, continent, non-violent to all creatures, and equal-minded in joy and sorrow.

He must see God everywhere, as the Lord of everything, also as the jiva. He must live a solitary life, not caring to own a house or possessions, having just enough clothes to cover his nakedness. He must learn contentment, to be satisfied with whatever fate brings him.

He must have complete faith in the scriptures that tell of Vishnu Narayana, yet he must not denigrate or mock other sacred books, or faiths. He should practise pranayama, mowna and vairagya, and with these, control his mind, his speech and his body. He must be truthful, which demands restraint over his mind and his senses.

The seeker should listen to, sing about, and meditate upon the glory and the deeds of the Lord – upon His Avataras and his lila. The bhakta must dedicate all that he does to Narayana.

He must offer everything he owns, everything he does to Vishnu – his yagnas, what he gives as dana, his japa, his punya, the things he likes, his wife, children, his houses, and his very life.

The seeker must keep firm friendship with holy men, devotees of Krishna, who see Him as the Atman and the Master of the universe; and he must view all creation as a manifestation of Krishna, particularly the Rishis, saints of the Lord, who are men of dharma.

From the Muni, the seeker learns how to become absorbed in conversations with other bhaktas, in satsangha – about the Lord, for such meetings create intense happiness, and detachment in all those that indulge in them.

With constant remembrance of Hari, after speaking about Him for years with other devotees, the seeker passes from the practice of bhakti as a discipline to parabhakti, where he experiences the Lord directly, as divine ecstasy. This condition is a spontaneous one, resulting from God's grace, accompanied by a torrent of bliss, which makes the bhakta's hair stand on end, continuously.

The advanced seeker, who has this premabhakti, can be found sobbing his heart out at times, when the Lord seems not to be with him. At other times, he laughs loudly to think how God allows his devotees to command him. Often he is filled with rapture and utters things that seem mad, which no one else can decipher.

At times, such a bhakta sings and dances in transport, unaware of anything around him. At others, he mimes the Lord's lila, while frequently he lapses into profound samadhi, silent, and absorbed in the Brahman.

After being taught the Bhagavata Dharma by an accomplished master, and helped along by the faith created by its practice, the bhakta crosses safely over Vishnu's divine maya, which others find so difficult to overcome."

Raja Nimi asked, "Greatest of the knowers of Brahman, I beg you tell me about that infinite Brahman, about the Paramatman, who is also called Narayana, the Divine One."

Another of the Navayogis, Pippalayana, replied, "Rajan, Narayana is the Supreme Truth; he creates, preserves, and destroys the universe. Himself Un-born, causeless, and immutable, he manifests himself as the states of wakefulness, sleep, and dreams, yet remains apart from these, and unaffected by them.

He quickens the body, the senses, prana, and the mind. Know, O King, that He is the Final Truth, called differently as Narayana, Brahman, and Paramatman, because he infuses these with life.

Even as the sparks that a fire emits do not illumine or burn the fire, the Brahman emits the mind, speech, eyes, the intellect, prana and the senses, but these cannot reveal or encompass Him. Not the hymns of the

Veda, which are the authority upon the Atman, can illumine the Lord directly, but only by saying what he is not. Their negations imply His existence and Being – the final Ground.

In the beginning, there was only the Infinite Brahman, Pranava, AUM. Later, the Brahman became known as the triune Pradhana, comprising the attributes of sattva, rajas, and tamas.

When He is the Creator, with rajas dominant, he is Sutratman or Hiranyagarbha; when sattva dominates, knowledge, He is Mahat. And when the avidya of tamas rules, he becomes the Jiva or Ahamkara.

The single Brahman becomes many, with His awesome maya, and shines forth as the Gods that preside over the senses, the senses themselves, their objects, and experiences. He is everything that is sukshma and sthula, and remains beyond both. He that is All needs no proof of his own existence! It is the human faculties that cannot hope to fathom Him.

The Atman was never born. It neither grows nor diminishes; it neither weakens nor dies. He is the eternal witness of the transience of the mortal body. He is changeless, pure and omnipresent consciousness and being. As with prana, the Atman appears to be manifold only when he is reflected by the manifestations of the senses. Just as prana continues through all the lives of a jiva – only these senses are born and die, not the Atman, the Soul.

A jiva is born into countless species – from eggs, wombs, seed, and sweat – and acquires different bodies. Yet, the same prana pursues and infuses the jiva. When the senses and the ego melt into sleep, the Atman remains – pure consciousness, immutable and without any other beside it.

In sleep, Consciousness does not cease to exist just because the sleeper, when he wakes, has the memory of an experience of undivided bliss, without any experience.

But he that seeks his joy in the service of Padmanabha, supporting the Lotus of the worlds in his navel – for such a one, his faith grows day by day and this dispels the darkness in his heart created by the life of the body and the senses. When the heart is cleansed, the truth of the Atman shines through even as sunlight does into eyes that have been cured of blindness."

Said Raja Nimi, "I beg you, tell me about karma yoga, the path of deeds, which purifies a man's mind and leads him to a condition where he renounces karma, and treads the gyana marga. Long ago, in my father's presence, I asked Sanaka and his saintly brothers the same question, but they gave me no reply. Why did they not answer me?"

Aavirhotra, another of the Navayogis, replied, "Only the Veda decides what ordained karma and forbidden karma are, and when abstinence from ordained karma should occur. Not common custom, observation, or logic can decide these matters. The Veda is divinely inspired, not composed by any man – hence, even the greatest scholars find it hard to fathom. The hymns of the Veda have secret and subtle meanings; they can be mystifying.

Even as parents speak sweetly to their child to give him a medicine, the hymns of the Veda appear to offer heavenly joys, but in fact obliquely indicate another Truth; they have a hidden purpose.

Even as a specific is administered to cure an illness, the karmas prescribed in the Vedas are mean to free a man from all karma, not to have him continue performing them endlessly.

The ignorant man, who does not restrain his senses and fails to perform the karma ordained for him in the Veda, is guilty of the sin of neglecting his dharma. He will go from death to death upon the wheel of samsara.

If a man performs the karma prescribed in the Veda, with a spirit of detachment and with bhakti toward the Lord, he will find the condition of naishkarmya, where he discovers the quietude beyond the performance of karma – the consciousness of the Atman. The felicities offered in the Veda are merely honeyed promises, made to the dull and the stupid man, to make him tread the sacred path.

The man who wants to sever the bonds of ahamkara quickly should worship Keshava with the rituals of tantra, as well as observing the Vedic karma. Let the aspirant seek the blessings of his Acharya, and receive perception in the ceremonial worship of the Mahapurusha. Then let him worship any form of the Lord Vishnu that attracts his heart.

He should bathe, then sit facing an image of the Lord, before purifying himself with pranayama and bhutashuddhi. He must protect himself with rites such as the nyasa, where he surrenders different parts of his body for protection to the Gods that rule them, and then begin his adoration of Hari.

He sweeps and washes the floor, and washes the idol, removing the old sandalwood paste, garlands and ashes upon it. He collects flowers and whatever else he needs to offer to the Lord, and performs prokshana by sprinkling holy water on the place where he will sit. He then worships Narayana with intense devotion.

Otherwise, he can worship an image of God, which he creates and installs in his heart.

He readies the vessel that will hold the holy water for arghya and padya, focuses his thought upon the God fervently, then he performs the six nyasas, beginning with his heart, then chants the mulamantra that he has received from his Guru. He now offers Narayana the flowers, sandalpaste, and holy water, both to the image and in his heart.

Chanting the mulamantra, he worships his chosen image of the Lord, both as a total Image, and the various limbs of His body separately. He worships his weapons, the Sudarshana and the rest, his servitors, Sunanda, Garuda and the others – with arghya, padya, offerings of sandalwood paste, garlands, akshatas, grains of unbroken rice that he applies only to the idol's brow, incense, lamps and food.

He adores each form of the Lord with the proper mantra, offering holy water to wash his hands and feet, and for achamana, washing His mouth. He bathes the idol and drapes it in the cloths he has brought. He embellishes it with the ornaments he has. He sings the Lord's praises, and then prostrates himself at His feet.

He worships the idol before him, and thinks of himself as being part of Hari, his own spirit being infused with the Lord's. He sets the remaining flowers, sandalwood paste from the idol on his head, sprinkles the water with which he has washed the idol over his head, and having installed the idol with deep bhakti, he also installs Narayana in his heart, as the final worship.

The man that adores Achyuta, the Supreme Lord, the Paramatman, as being present in fire, the sun, in water, or in his own heart, such a bhakta is quickly liberated from samsara."

THE SERMON OF THE NAVAYOGIS

(*Continued*)

RAJA NIMI SAID, "I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT THE AVATARAS OF THE Lord Hari, when He incarnated himself, at his sweet and divine will – those of the past, the present, and the future."

The Navayogi Drumila answered him, "Only a callow person would dare try to enumerate all the glories and deeds of the Infinite Lord. He might, conceivably, over many ages and with a huge effort, count the specks of dust upon this Earth, but not the attributes of the Eternal One, who is the source and abode of every majesty and power that exists.

Narayana, the Original Being, emanated the five elements, and from these created the Body of the Cosmos, the Viraj, even as his own body. He entered into that Body, in amsa, with a part of himself, and became the Purusha, the Indweller.

The Universe that he entered is the body of the Purusha; it is founded upon the Lord's personality. All the organs of knowledge and action that exist are founded in those organs of His. The knowledge that his creatures own are based in his consciousness; from his prana, their mental and physical strength, the potency of their senses and will, all these come. He is the source and the basis of the gunas of Prakriti; with sattva, rajas, and tama, He nurtures, creates and destroys the universe.

From rajas, Brahma sprang to be the Creator; from sattva came Vishnu, who bestows the fruits of yagnas and protects the worlds, the dvijas, and dharma; from the tamas of the Purusha, Rudra came, who annihilates the universe. He, the Adi Purusha, is the One who, as Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, creates, preserves and dissolves the cosmos.

He incarnated himself as Narayana and as Nara, foremost among Rishis, perfectly serene. Nara was the son of Dharma Prajapati and his wife Murti, the daughter of Daksha. He expounded the karma marga, which ends in realisation of the Atman, when all karma ceases, to other Rishis, Narada among them. He still dwells in tapasya upon Mount Badarikasrama, worshipped and served by the greatest Sages.

Indra grew afraid that, with tapasya, the Rishi Narayana meant to usurp his throne in Swarga. He sent Kama Deva to distract him from his dhyana. Kama arrived in Badarikasrama with a bevy of Apsaras, Vasantha season of spring, and the malaya breeze from the sandalwood groves. They did not know Who this was, and the Apsaras, irresistible nymphs, cast their powerfully seductive sidelong glances, as lethal as arrow storms, at Narayana Muni.

Knowing exactly why Kama had come, and who had sent him, Narayana laughed out loud, but with no trace of pride. The Apsaras, the malaya breeze, the sudden spring, the power of the God of Love – none of these had any power to move him.

Seeing this, Kama and the others became terrified. The curse of such a Great One was to be feared indeed. They lost their haughty composure and trembled. But Narayana smiled gently to reassure them.

The Lord said, 'O mighty Kama, O soft Breeze, Spring, lovely Apsaras, do not be afraid. Accept our hospitality, lest otherwise our asrama lose its *sat*, its very reality.'

Rajan, the celestial tempters that Indra sent bent their heads for shame. Crestfallen, they said to Him that gives sanctuary to all, 'Lord, you are beyond the pale of maya; Prakriti has no sway over you, who are so holy that Maharishis, absorbed in the Atman, serve your sacred feet. So, we do not wonder at your being imperturbable and merciful.

The Devas feel envious of those that serve you; for, the Gods see your bhaktas ascend beyond Devaloka to find union with you, with the Brahman.

The Devas place many obstacles in the paths of your bhaktas. However, those that offer havis to Indra and his Devas at yagnas – these remain the slaves of the Devas, and face no impediments. Yet, no obstacle prevails over your bhaktas, for by your grace they advance, setting their feet squarely on the heads of the trials we place in their paths.

Lord, so many great Sages cross over the sea of obstacles we set in their way – hunger, thirst, inclement weather, heat, cold, rain and wind, the pleasures of the palate and of the bed. Yet, when they arrive at the last obstacle, anger, they drown in a puddle no bigger than a cow's hoofprint! And they lose all the punya of their long and arduous tapasya.'

They lavished their praises upon him, and now Nara Narayana decided he would curb the pride of the Apsaras and the others a little. With a thought, he brought some women that served him before them. So ravishingly beautiful were these that the Apsaras seemed plain before them – each of those exquisitely clad and adorned women was as lovely as Sri Lakshmi. So fragrant were their bodies that Indra's tempters, even Kama, stood transfixed.

Chastened, they bowed low to Narayana. He said to them, 'Choose any one of these, and you may take her with you to Devaloka, to be an ornament in your realm.'

'Yes, Lord,' said they.

They chose Urvashi, who seemed the most beautiful of the nymphs of Narayana. Prostrating before Him, they flew back to Indra.

In the Sudharma, Indra's sabha, Kama and his train greeted Indra and the other Devas. They described what had chanced upon Badarikasrama, and the awesome spiritual power of the Rishi Narayana. Indra became astonished and trembled a little to think how indiscreet he had been to tempt the wrath of such a one."

Pausing a moment, the Navayogi Drumila continued, "For the weal of the world, Lord Vishnu incarnated himself as a Swan, a Hamsa that expounded the gyana yoga to the Pitamaha. Again, he came as Datta, the Kumara Munis, and as our father Rishabha. He came as Hayagriva, to recover the lost Veda from the Asura Madhu.

During the Pralaya, He came as Matsya, the Fish, to save the Manu, King Satyavrata, this Bhumi and the seeds of all green plants and herbs. As Varaha, the Cosmic Boar, he slew Diti's son, the Asura Hiranyaksha, and raised up the Earth, Bhumi Devi, who lay sunken beneath the Ekarnava, the Sea of the Deluge. As Kuurma, the Tortoise, he supported the sinking Mount Mandara upon his massive back, while the Kshirasagara was being churned for the amrita. He came as Hari to save the lord of elephants, whose trunk had been seized by the gigantic crocodile.

He rescued the minute Sages called the Valakhilyas, who had gone to fetch samidhs for the Rishi Kashyapa. They fell into a pool of water that had filled a cow's hoofprint, which for them was like a sea, and they were drowning.

He took Indra's sin of Brahmahatya from him – when the Deva king slew the brahmana demon Vritrasura. He freed the Apsaras and other women of Devaloka, whom the Asuras had made them prisoners, after vanquishing the Devas in battle. He came as Narasimha, the Manticore, and slew Hiranyakashyapu, mighty king of Asuras.

In every Manvantara, he is the ally of the Devas in their constant wars against the Asuras, the forces of darkness. He kills the lords of the demons, to protect the worlds. He came as Vamana, Aditi's son, and took the Earth from Mahabali, the son of Diti – by begging for land he could measure with three strides with his diminutive legs – and returned it to the Devas.

He came as Parasurama, brand of fire born into the clan of Bhrigu, who lit the conflagration that consumed the Haihaya dynasty. Twenty-one times, he wiped the kshatriyas from the face of the Earth.

As Sita's consort Rama, he built the bridge that spanned the sea, crossed into Lanka, razed the citadel of that city, and slew the ten-headed Rakshasa Ravana. Glory be to Rama, whose very name burns up the sins of the world.

Un-born, birthless, he will be born again into the House of Yadu and rid the Earth of her burden of evil. Such things he will accomplish, which even the Devas cannot dream of doing. Then, he shall come as the Buddha, and by his dialectic and refutations confound the evil ones that have taken to performing yagnas, though they are unfit. Finally, when the kali yuga draws to an end, he will incarnate as Kalki and annihilate the Asuras, the demonic tyrants that pretend to be kings.

Great Nimi, beyond count are the Avataras and exploits of the Lord of the universe, of untold majesty. These are but a handful of them," said the Navayogi Drumila,'

Said Narada to Vasudeva," Suka Deva told Parikshit.

THE SERMON OF THE NAVAYOGIS

(*Continued*)

SUKA CONTINUED, "NARADA SAID, 'NIMI ASKED THE NAVAYOGIS, "Illumined Ones, what becomes of those that never worship the Lord Hari, have no restraint over their senses but always indulge themselves, and live only to gratify their desires?"

The brother called Chamasa replied, "Distinguished by the varying dominance of the three gunas in them, the four varnas – brahmana, kshatriya, vaisya, and sudra – and the four asramas of life emerged from the Purusha's face, arms, thighs, and feet.

In the brahmana, sattva dominates; in the kshatriya, rajas rules, mixed with sattva; rajas and tamas rule the vaisya, while tamas does the sudra.

Men who are born with inherent knowledge, yet disregard this and fail to worship the Lord God, their source, their sanctuary, or hate him out of their vanity – such men surely devolve from the lofty birth they acquired.

But women, sudras, and others born far from places where they might ever listen to the legends of the Lord, and are thus ignorant – these deserve the pity of Rishis like yourselves. You must teach them the way of the Lord, the bhakti marga.

However, there are brahmanas, kshatriyas and vaisyas, who first by their births and then by their upanayam, the investiture of the sacred thread, have every opportunity to worship the Lord Hari. They disregard the great chance, and tread the path of arthavaada instead, the superficial way of the Vedic ritual, becoming attached to the fruit of their karma.

They have no true understanding of karma, which must be performed without any attachment to its fruit. They think of themselves as being learned, great scholars, and are so full of conceit that they do not seek the guidance of the truly learned upon the karma marga. Deluded by the honeyed passages in the Veda, which promise the felicities of Devaloka, they preach the heavenly pleasures to be had from performing Vedic rituals.

Rajas dominates the characters of these men. They are vicious, ruthless, lustful and vengeful as serpents. Hypocritical, sinful, and self-regarding, they scoff at the true bhaktas of Hari.

Addicted to the pleasures of the bed, their true God is woman. Their homes are places for indulging carnality of every kind. They spend their days in the company of kindred spirits, and endlessly discuss and gloat over their achievements and plans to further their prosperity.

They perform hollow yagnas, without adhering to the true method, without distributing food or giving the proper dakshina. They slaughter animals in the name of these sacrifices – but only to eat, and without knowing the consequences of such mindless killing.

Blinded by the arrogance of wealth, power, lineage, learning, generosity, beauty, strength, skill, these savage ones despise not only the good devotees of the Lord, but mock Mahavishnu Himself!

Those that have no wisdom ignore what the Veda sings so explicitly – that the Supreme God pervades everything, even like akasa, and he is the Antaryamin, the Indweller in every soul, who is always transcendent. Instead, those gone astray prefer to interpret the Veda to suit themselves, to justify their every venal and carnal indulgence, their every perversion.

All the living are naturally prone to have sex, to eat meat, and to drink wine. No Vedic injunction needs to prompt them to these indulgences. Indeed, the Veda only regulates these – it allows intercourse with one's wedded wife; it permits the eating of meat that is left over from a sacrifice, and the drinking of wine after a Sautramani yagna, but not otherwise. The true intention of the Veda is to gradually promote abstinence, by allowing regulated indulgence.

The true purpose of owning wealth is to facilitate a righteous life, a life of dharma. Its sole aim is Self-realisation, the enlightenment that brings instant peace. Alas, men use their money for pleasure, for their families, for luxury; they forget Yama, the God Death, that terrible and inexorable enemy of their mortal bodies.

Even during the Sautramani, only the sniffing of wine is permitted not its drinking. So, too, during a sacrifice, an animal may be the offering, its slaughter accompanied by the chanting of apposite mantras. An animal is never killed just to be eaten, and certainly not for the vile pleasure of cruelty. As for sexual intercourse, it is allowed to produce children, and not for mere gratification.

But the fools that claim otherwise do not begin to understand their swadharma, whose path is one of purity. The evil ones are self-righteous and full of pride. They slaughter animals for the pleasure of their palates and are, in turn, devoured by the same beasts in hell.

Passionately attached to the moribund body and to those related to it by blood and other ties, they torment their fellow men, who are their very selves, and also Sri Hari, the indwelling Atman in everyone. These evil ones fall into the deepest hell.

Those that have not understood the gyana of Truth, yet have some half knowledge, pursue the threefold path of dharma, artha and kama. These, too, ruin themselves, setting a course to spiritual suicide.

Their Atman hidden in ignorance, their desires forever unsatisfied, these men mistake karma for knowledge. The restless ones denude their spiritual potential by believing that Vedic ritual is the pinnacle of wisdom. Inevitably they come to grief when Kaala, great Time, destroys all their castles in the air. They find they have failed to accomplish the true mission of their lives, and discover the depths of misery.

Time deprives those who never worship Vasudeva of their wealth, homes, lands, kith and kin, all hard won, and they are cast into the outer reaches of darkness."

King Nimi said, "Tell me the different forms and colours the Lords assumed in different yugas, and with what rites He is worshipped in these."

Another of the Navayogis, Karabhaajana, answered, "In the four yugas, krita, treta, dwapara, and kali, the Lord assumes different forms and is adored in diverse ways.

In the krita yuga, He is a brahmacharin, fair, white in complexion. He has four arms, wears jata, garments of bark, valkala, and the skin of an antelope. He wears the sacred thread, carries a rosary of rudraksha beads in his hands, a danda and a kamandalu made of gourd.

Men of that yuga are naturally serene. No enmity exists between them; all are friendly and compassionate and look upon one another as their own selves. They worship the Lord with tapasya and dhyana, restraining their senses and their minds.

Bhaktas praise the Lord, and call him Hamsa, Suparna, Vaikuntha, Dharma, Yogeshwara, Amala, Ishwara, Purusha, Avyakta, and Paramatman.

In treta yuga, He is red-skinned, golden-haired, four-armed, and wears a three-stranded girdle around his waist to indicate initiation. His form embodies the Veda, and he carries sruk and sruva – ladles and spoons for feeding the sacrificial fire – and other requisites for the Vedic ritual.

Wise men, righteous masters of the Veda, worship Sri Hari, who is the embodiment of all the Gods, who removes the miseries of men, who roots out the sufferings of men, with the rituals prescribed in the Veda.

They call him Vishnu, Yagna, Prishnigarbha, Sarva Deva, Urukrama, Vrishaakapi, Jayanta, and Urugaaya.

In dwapara yuga, the Lord is bluish, like the atasi, the hemp flower. He wears yellow silken robes, carries the Sudarshana Chakra, the Kaumodaki and his other weapons. He bears the Srivatsa whorl and the Kaustubha ruby upon his breast.

Rajan, in this yuga his bhaktas adore the Lord with the emblems of sovereignty like the ceremonial white parasol, chowries, chamaras, and the rest. They worship him with rites from both the Veda and the Tantras.

'Salutations to you, O Vasudeva! Salutations, Sankarshana, obeisance Pradyumna and Aniruddha, O Lord of splendour of the four vyuhas.

All hail Rishi Narayana, Paramapurusha, Lord of the universe, Indweller, Soul of all beings!'

Thus, lord of the Earth, O Nimi, the men of the dwapara yuga worship. Now listen to how men of the kali yuga adore the Lord with myriad tantrik rituals.

During that age, the wise worship the Lord as being black-skinned, but lustrous like sapphire. Mainly, his name is chanted at sacrifices, and his praises are sung. He is adored as being perfect in each limb, adorned with the Kaustubha and his other ornaments, bearing the Sudarshana Chakra and his other weapons, and surrounded by his attendants, like Sunanda and the rest.

The bhaktas pray thus to him, 'O Universal One! I prostrate at your lotus feet, most worthy of being meditated upon. You are the source of all that is sacred. You are he that saves us from indignity and humiliation, who answers every prayer, the sanctuary of every tirtha, whom Siva and Brahma hymn, the final refuge, who are the ship in which we cross over the turbulent sea of samsara.

I bow at your feet, who for the sake of dharma renounced a kingdom that even the Devas coveted, and went gladly into the forest, to honour your father, Dasaratha's, word. I bow at your feet, O Ultimate Being, who, in the jungle gave chase to a deer, which was no deer, for your beloved Sita wanted it for herself.'

In this way, O Nimi, the people of each yuga worship the Lord Hari, who confers every blessing, in the forms and by chanting the names appropriate to the age.

The Maharishis, who see deeply, look upon the kali yuga with greater favour than the other ages – for, in this yuga alone men attain the four purusharthas merely by chanting the names of the Lord and narrating his legends.

For jivas caught in the wheel of transmigration there is no higher way to find moksha, eternal beatitude and peace than singing the names and the praises of the Lord.

Rajan, souls from the other ages, the krita, treta and dwapara long to be born into the kali yuga, for more bhaktas are born into this yuga than the others.

O King, these devotees of Narayana are certainly born in other lands, as well, but a great concentration of them is born into the Dravida countries, where the rivers Tamraparni, the Kritamala, the Payashwini or Palara, the most sacred Kaveri, and the great, west-flowing Mahanadi or Periyar flow. Men that drink the waters of these rivers become pure of heart and they develop deep devotion for the Lord Vasudeva, the glorious One.

The bhakta who loses his sense of duality, seeing only the Lord Mukunda everywhere, and surrenders himself at the feet of the Lord, who is the refuge of all beings, such a man is no longer bound by any obligation toward the Devas or Pitrs, to Rishis, his family or other creatures. He is no servant of any of these. He need not perform any of the pancha mahayagnas that are obligatory for all by the Shastra – for he is above the Shastra and its commandments.

There is no dharma that binds him, not to anyone or anything. He may neglect to perform his dharma and he shall be forgiven, for Hari dwells in the heart of the man who has surrendered himself at His feet, and worships no other, lesser God. If such a bhakta sins, because of some karma from a previous life, the Lord absolves him of his sin."

Thus spoke the Navayogis to King Nimi,' said Narada Muni. 'Nimi was delighted to listen to their exposition of the Bhagavata Dharma. With his Acharya, he prostrated himself to worship the Navayogis, those illustrious sons of Jayanti.

Then, even as they all looked on, the Nine vanished from before their eyes, for they had great occult siddhis. It is told that Nimi followed the Bhagavata Dharma they preached to him, with great earnestness, and he attained the final goal, moksha.

O Vasudeva, great one, you can also find moksha for yourself, if you tread the way of the Bhagavata Dharma with faith, restraining your mind and your senses, and practising vairagya.

Your fame and Devaki's fills this world – for, has not the Lord Hari, master of everything that exists, been born as your son?

You see him daily, you touch him, speak with him, sleep next to him, eat and sit with him, and love and treat him like your son. Your minds and hearts have been purified beyond all reckoning.

Sishupala, Paundraka, Salva and the other kings that hated him – they also thought constantly about Krishna, the way he walks, his lila, his eyes and gaze, and even by the path of enmity they found union with him. What then to say of those who look upon him with love?

But never think that this Krishna is just your son. He is the Lord, the Soul of all the worlds and every being, who is immutable, and has manifested as a man, hiding his divine and cosmic majesty by the power of his own maya.

He is the Avatara, come to save the world and the pious; he has come to rid the earth of her burden of evil – the Asuras who have been born as kshatriya kings. His fame spreads across the world in tide, to help his bhaktas attain moksha, eternal bliss.'

Enthralled in their souls to hear what Narada said, Vasudeva and Devaki found their hearts cleansed of the darkness of avidya. Let any man listen to this sacred legend, with his mind focused in dhyana, single-pointed, and he, too, shall overcome the darkness in his heart and find illumination and liberation in this very world."

KRISHNA NEAR THE END OF HIS AVATARA

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONE DAY, BRAHMA CAME WITH HIS HOLY MIND-BORN sons, Sanaka and the other Kumaras, to Dwaraka. Bhava, Sri Parameshwara who is a Trikalagyani and knows the past, present and the future, also arrived in the Sea City with his ganas, his demigods and elementals.

The Maruts, Indra and the other sons of Aditi, the eight Vasus, the Aswini twins, the Ribhus, Angirasas, Viswedevas, Sadhyas, Gandharvas, Apsaras, Nagas, Siddhas, Sharanas, Guhyakas, Rishis, Pitrs, Vidyadharas and Kinnaras – all these celestial ones, and others, came to Dwaraka in a fair host for they were eager to see Krishna. They had all heard about his immaculate form, which enchanted the world, and his sacred fame that makes ashes of sins, his renown that had spread through the lokas like a flood.

They came to Dwaraka, focus of grace, wealth, wonder, and prosperity, all these lofty ones, and they saw the bewitching form of Krishna, and they gazed upon him in rapture, and gazed on, unwinkingly, because they could not look away.

They covered him in a profusion of unearthly garlands, made from Devaloka's rarest blooms, and then began to sing his praises, who is the Lord of worlds, with this hymn that is known for its great beauty of devotion and meaning.

The Devas sang,

'Natasmate Nataha Padaaravindam Buddhindriyapranamanovachobhi;
Yachinntyateyantahridi Bhavayuktaimumukshubhih Karmamyorupaashaath.

Lord, those that seek liberation from the shackles of karma can only fix their hearts upon your lotus feet in bhakti. But look how fortunate we are – that we can adore you in the flesh, with our senses, our minds, our lifebreath, and with our words.

Invincible One, You remain the inner sovereign of your maya of three gunas, while creating, preserving and destroying this unimaginably awesome and mysterious universe. Yet, this vast karma does not bind you, for you are beyond the reach of passion, always transcendent, and established in the eternal bliss of your Atman, untouched by passion.

Lord of all, one most deserving of praise, sinful men strive to purify themselves by dhyana, gyana, with dana, tapasya and yagnas. But they never find the chasteness and the potent faith that your bhaktas generate in their hearts by listening to your Purana – faith that grows in tide. It is for this that you incarnate yourself and live out your fabulous Avataras, so men may hear your glory sung, so they have splendid legends upon which to meditate.

Their hearts melting in love, tapasvins meditate upon your holy feet, to find moksha. Sattvatas, your devotees, worship your very feet in one of the four Vyuhas – as Vaasudeva, Samkarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha, so they find communion and become equal to you in your divine majesty.

The wise adore your feet during the three sandhyas, so they can transcend all the realms of the Devas. Ah, may your holy, holy feet become the fire in which our sins are consumed.

The Vedic ritualists meditate upon your feet in their sacred agni, while they hold oblations to feed the fire, and chant the mantras of the Veda. The Yogis, who want to possess the eight occult siddhis, fix their minds upon your feet as their Yogashastra tells them to.

The loftiest bhaktas, who have no desires, worship your feet in the purest, most ardent love. Ah, may those feet become the fire in which all our sins are consumed.

Even as any woman grows irate to see another wife of her husband sit in her place, Sri Lakshmi becomes annoyed to see your chest, her place, adorned by the vanamalas that your bhaktas offer you – the wildflower garlands that make your entire form glow! But you are unconcerned by her displeasure; you still wear your ancient vanamala, but gladly receive the new ones that your bhaktas beyond number offer you.

You seem to say that you are more concerned about your devotees than about Sri! May those feet adorned with the flowers of offering become the fire in which all our sins are consumed.

Holy Lord of limitless powers! May your feet, which spanned the three worlds in three strides, remove our sins. Let them purify us – the feet that surmounted Satyaloka with the second stride, and became the highest pinnacle of all, a banner of victory, and the Ganga of three streams their tributary. Lord, your feet inspire the armies of light and strike terror in the hearts of the Asura legions; they further the cause of dharma and bring evil down.

May your perfect feet bless us, Lord, Purushottama, Master of Purusha and Prakriti, whose hands wield power over all the living and the embodied, from Brahma down – we who are always at war – even as cowherds do their cattle with ropes through their noses.

You are the Primal Cause in which all the worlds and galaxies arise, remain manifest, and finally, ineluctably, dissolve. The Veda speaks of you as the Cause of Prakriti, Purusha and Mahatattva. You are the wheel of Time, of three hubs, which spins swifter than light, plunging everything toward death. You are, indeed, the Purushottama, the Spirit beyond all things, in which everything abides.

The Cosmic Purusha gains his power from you, and in union with Yogamaya, conceives the Mahatattva, which is the embryonic universe. Conjoined with Maya, Purusha emanates the Cosmic Egg, brilliant, sheathed in layers.

Hrishikesa, lord of the senses, all the divine sport of maya, poured over you like an oblation, with its infinity of experiences, of pleasure and pain, never moves you, your inmost stillness. It never binds you in the least.

Even while you enjoy the objects and experiences of the senses, they do not affect you. Others live in constant fear of karma, even while they keep themselves aloof from it. Ah, you are the master: the universe of moving and motionless things is your toy.

Small wonder, then, that sixteen thousand exquisite wives did not cause the least ripple of passion in your mind, which is the Ocean. Not all their seductive glances, shot like arrows from the bows of their eyebrows, not their most ravishing smiles, their ardent and mystical lovemaking stirred you, not while you indulged them.

Two great rivers flow from you – the Ganga with the water that washes your feet, and the Purana of the legends of your incarnations and your divine lila. Both these bear the power to make ashes of the sins of all this world. Those that follow the dictates of the Veda bathe in both these streams, for the Veda enjoins them to listen to your Purana as well as to bathe in the Ganga.'

Thus sang the Devas."

Sri Suka continued, "When the Devas had praised Sri Krishna, and Parameshwara and Brahma had joined them, as well, Brahma positioned himself in the sky, and prostrated before Krishna.

Said the Creator, 'Lord, we came to you a while ago, and prayed that you remove the burden of evil that burgeoned upon the Earth. You have accomplished your mission, O Soul of the worlds.

You have established dharma firmly in the hearts of men that worship the truth. You have spread your fame, which sanctifies all that come into contact with it, across the world. You incarnated in the house of Yadu, with this form of unprecedented beauty. And you engaged in fabulous lila, of every sort, all to bless the Earth.

Prabhu, men that hear and sing of your life in the kali yuga shall have their sins taken from them easily, and, purified, shall find the light beyond ignorance.

Lord, Purushottama, a hundred and twenty-five years have passed since you incarnated in the house of Yadu.

O Foundation of the universe, now you have accomplished all the ends of the Devas, and nothing remains for you to do on this Bhumi. The Sages have cursed the Yadavas, and your clan is on the verge of becoming extinct.

So, Lord, if you think it time, return to your Place on High; grant us, that serve you as the guardians of the worlds, your blessing, nearness and protection.'

Krishna replied, 'Lord of the Gods, all your work is accomplished and the burden of the Earth has been made lighter.

But these Yadavas of mine still bestride the Earth, full of pride and power, wealthy and invincible. So far, I have restrained their ambition even as the shore does the sea, else they would overrun the world.

But once I leave this Earth, I have no doubt they will devastate humankind with their lack of restraint and their haughty might. They are given to doing as they please; they are given to excesses.

Yet, the Rishis have cursed them already, prophesying their doom. Once it is fulfilled and this dangerous clan is razed, as well, I shall come to Satyaloka, O Brahma, on my way to Vaikuntha.' "

Sri Suka continued, "When Krishna had said this, Brahma and the Devas prostrated before him again, and left for their subtle realms.

Soon, evil omens appeared in Dwaraka, and the elders of the Yadava clan came in some alarm to Krishna.

Krishna said to them, 'Ah, the portents of doom are all around us in this place. The curse of the Rishis hangs like an astra of death over our heads.

Revered friends, wise ones, we must not remain in Dwaraka if we value our lives. Instead, let us go to Prabhasa immediately. Soma the Moon bathed there when Daksha Prajapati cursed him to wane forever from consumption, and he was cured and had his digits restored to him.

Let us bathe in those sacral waters, offer tarpana to the Devas and Pitrs, feed good brahmanas, and give generous gifts and alms to deserving men. Let these rituals be the ship in which we cross the sea of misfortune that threatens to drown us.'

Rajan, at Krishna's word, the Yadavas decided they would waste no time, but yoked their horses to their chariots and prepared to leave for Prabhasa.

The good Uddhava, who was Krishna's constant companion and bhakta, came to him privately. Hands folded, tears in his eyes, Uddhava prostrated himself at Krishna's feet.

Said Uddhava, 'Lord of all Devas, master of yoga whose renown is a blessing to those that hear of it, you mean to destroy the Yadavas and to leave the world! You could well have turned away the curse of the Rishis, but you did not.

Krishna, Lord! I cannot live without you for even a moment. I beg you, take me with you to your World above. Krishna, men that listen to the tales of your life, like amrita, feel that all else in the world is insipid, meaningless.

Then what about us, who have been near you, serving you for so long – daily sitting with you, lying beside you, walking, eating, playing dice, just being with you in your presence all the time? What will become of us?'

Then, in some despair, Uddhava said, as if to give himself courage, hope, 'We, your bhaktas, will surely transcend your maya – having served you, worn the sandalwood paste left over after you anointed yourself, the vanamalas that you wore day to day, eating the food you left.

There are other hermits that clothe themselves only with the sky and the quarters, always at tapasya, who observe perfect continence. These pure, serene Sannyasis that have renounced everything find the Akshara Brahman, which is your realm.

Greatest Yogin! We that wander the trails of karma shall find our way past the impenetrable darkness of avidya by absorbing ourselves in telling your holy fame, speaking of you with other bhaktas.

We shall remember your magical ways and your every enchantment and glory in this human form you took – what you said and what you did, your voice and words, your teachings, you magnificent gait! – and we shall effortlessly cross over the sea of samsara.'

Krishna saw that Uddhava was asking him for some last words, to which he could cling perhaps. The Lord, who had been born as the son of Devaki, spoke gently to his friend, servitor and ardent devotee."

UDDHAVA GITA: THE AVADHUTA'S SERMON ON HIS GURUS

SRI SUKA SAID, "KRISHNA SAID TO UDDHAVA,

'I do mean to leave the world, as you have understood. Brahma, Parameshwara and the other Devas also wish it so.

I have done everything that I came for, with Balarama, in amsa; I have accomplished the mission of the Devas, what Brahma asked of me.

The Yadavas have been doomed to perish in the fire of the curse of the Rishis; they will die in the only way that they can: they will kill one another. Seven days from now, this Sea City Dwaraka will sink beneath the waves.

When I leave this world, the kali yuga shall enter it fully and have complete sway – the spirit of evil, the sinister age.

Uddhava, once I leave this place, do not remain here yourself. For men will turn their backs on dharma in the age of kali; they shall forget every truth and tread the labyrinths of evil.

Relinquish your attachment for your family and your people. Surrender yourself to me, and roam the Earth, seeing me everywhere and in all things. This world, perceived by the mind, by speech, the eyes, ears, and other senses is unreal and evanescent; it is like an illusion in a magic show.

The man whose mind is unrestrained, he sees many lives and objects everywhere; he that sees the world thus is subject to the notions of dharma and adharma, of good and evil, of endless divisions. For such a one, there springs up the distinction between karma, akarma, and vikarma – action, inaction and forbidden action.

So, restrain your mind and your senses, gently, and see the world as your own Soul, the Atman. I am that Atman, and I am the Lord. He that truly knows the Shastras and is illumined, who feels united with the Atman at all times, he is always joyful, and finds no obstacles in his path.

Such a one passes beyond the distinction between good and evil: he neither does what is beneficial because the Veda enjoins him to, nor avoids causing any injury for this reason. He is like a child; everything he does is motiveless and spontaneous.

Enlightened, serene, established in cosmic benevolence, he sees God as the essence and the reality of the world. Otherwise, he sees all manifest existence as Soul, and he is freed from the tribulations of samsara.'

Hearing this, Uddhava, profound bhakta and fervid seeker, prostrated before Krishna, and said, 'You bestow the fruits of Yoga; you are the treasure of Yogins. You reveal yourself through Yoga; you are the origin of Yoga. To help me evolve, you advise me to sever all my bonds of attachment and to take Sannyasa.

Omnipotent One, this renunciation of the objects of the senses and the bonds of the mind is hard for those that live in luxury, surrounded by and indulging in pleasure. Why, for those that have no bhakti for you, the soul of us all, I am certain it is impossible.

Fool that I am, maya binds me and I am deluded that I am this body and that everyone and everything it knows is mine. Lord, teach me, your servant, how I can most quickly achieve the relinquishment of which you speak.

None among the Devas, but only you can teach me about the Atman, the Self-effulgent and Self-conscious Truth. For about this, all the embodied, even Brahma, are deluded by your maya, which causes them to believe that the external world alone is real.

Suffering in samsara, resenting and being disgusted with my life, I seek sanctuary in you, O Narayana. You are the true friend of the jiva. You are He that abides in Vaikuntha; you are the pure, infinite, omniscient One, Lord of all things.'

Krishna said, 'Usually, men that have the inherent ability to analyse and investigate the nature of reality raise themselves out of the morass of the life of the passions by their own discrimination. They need no Guru for this.

Even the lower creatures, to some extent, are able to tend to their evolution. Man possesses intellect and discrimination, and he can surely be his own teacher. By observation and inference, he can understand what is truly good for him, in the ultimate sense. The Atman is the real teacher.

When a jiva finds a mature human birth and grows to be adept in the Samkhya and at Yoga, he understands me, that I am the omnipotent Spirit.

Many are the species in creation – some with one leg, others with two, three and four, some with many, and yet others with none. Of all the species in this world, man, with his body, is dearest to me.

When the human being cannot find me with his senses or his mind, the true seeker begins to look for me by direct perception, which transcends all the limited faculties.

The great Rishis illustrate this with the example of a conversation between Dattatreya of awesome splendour, an Avadhuta who had realised the Brahman, and King Yadu of great power and intellect.

Once, Yadu, who knew dharma well, met the Avadhuta wandering the Earth as he pleased, free from fear. The brahmana was young and bore the signs of the loftiest enlightenment.

King Yadu asked him, "Holy One, you are so young but you have the highest illumination and wisdom. Yet, you do no work, but roam the world like a child. How did you find your illumination, which usually demands years of tapasya and restraint?

There are wise men that pursue the path of the four purusharthas diligently. They, too, seek the Atman, but are also motivated by the desire to live long, to have fame and wealth.

You are strong of body, learned beyond measure, capable and alert, handsome, and eloquent. But you go about like a fool, a drunkard, a mad man, or even at times like one possessed.

While other men burn in the raging fires of greed and carnal lust, you are unmoved by these – like a great elephant plunged in the Ganga!

Holy One, tell me what it is that always fills your heart with such joy, though you are a solitary, without a companion, and any sensual enjoyment."

The highly intelligent King Yadu, devotee of Sages, prostrated before Dattatreya, and asked him this question with great humility and reverence.

The Avadhuta replied, "Rajan, I have many Gurus, whom I have accepted as the teachers of my spirit. Numerous lessons I learnt from them, until I became free from desire and attachment. Now, I range the world as I please. Listen, I will tell you about those Gurus.

I have twenty-four masters to whom I resorted, and from their ways and their natures, I learnt all the lessons I needed to know. They are the Earth, air, sky, water, fire, the sun, the moon, kapota the dove, the python, the sea, the river, the moth, the honeybee, the elephant, the honey-gatherer, the deer, the fish, Pinagala the courtesan, kurara the osprey, the child, the virgin, the arrow-smith, the snake, the spider, and pesakrit the wasp.

Grandson of Nahusha, I will tell you what lesson I learnt from each of my Gurus, and how. Give me your close attention, O tiger among men.

A man should not abandon his chosen path and dharma even when he is attacked senselessly by wanton beings. He must remain undisturbed and realise that this is his own prarabdha, the karma of his past, his fate. This lesson I learnt from the Earth.

Also, from the mountain, which is part of the Earth, I learnt stillness, and as the mountain bears trees, grasses, water for other beings to use, I also learnt to live for the sake of others. As a pupil of the tree, I learnt to give of every part of myself – for the tree allows itself to be cut, uprooted, transplanted, gives of its leaves, flowers and fruit.

The Sage is satisfied with as much food as maintains his prana, to keep his knowledge burning, and his mind and senses bright. He must not crave food to gratify his palate. Even if he is in touch with the objects of the senses, he must be like the air – unaffected by them, their pleasures and pains.

Even if he has a body, and performs the various functions of that body, a Yogin established in the consciousness of his Atman is never affected by the senses or their objects: just as air may carry a smell but is untainted by it.

He identifies with the Brahman, and realises that, like the sky, the Atman has no boundaries and is untrammelled by the body. The Soul is everywhere, equally in all beings, moving and motionless, an inevitable and changeless Presence.

Clouds blown by the wind do not change the sky, so, too, the Atman is not tainted because it dwells in a body. The body is merely a composite of the elements, fire, water, earth and the others, into which the gunas of Prakriti evolve when Time moves them.

The Muni is pure, holy and inherently, spontaneously loving and sweet. He has a sanctifying influence upon other men – in this, he resembles the waters of the Ganga that wash away sins, when they are seen, touched or even hymned.

The Avadhuta is majestic, ever renewed by the fire of tapasya, his greatness incorruptible. He owns nothing, not even a bowl; his belly is his only receptacle for food! He will eat anywhere, anything, and because he is forever in communion with the Brahman, he, like a fire that consumes all things, remains pure regardless.

Often he hides who he truly is; at other times, he reveals himself as one worthy of being worshipped by those that wish for their own evolution. He takes whatever he is offered, so that the offerer's sins of past and future are burnt. He is like the fire, which consumes everything that is offered into it.

The Lord, with his maya, has created this world; he enters into it, manifests himself in all the forms of creation, even as fire does, which is latent in its fuel.

Everything that happens to a man between being conceived in the womb and burnt at the smasana affects only his body, not his Atman. The moon's digits wax and wane, not the moon itself.

Time is an inscrutable torrent, in which, every moment, countless bodies that the Atman assumes are born and die. But the changes, moment to moment, pass unobserved even like fresh tongues of flame in a raging fire.

Even as the sun evaporates water and pours it down again as rain, at the right time, the Yogi accepts the senses and their objects – not for his selfish enjoyment, but to release them to the needy at the proper time.

When the Atman is unmanifest, there is no duality; when the Soul abides in many forms, those with ignorant minds think of the Atman as being many. This is like the sun being one, but his reflection in many pans of water appearing to be many suns.

The Avadhuta should never be too attached to anyone, or he will suffer as the dove, the kapota bird, did in the story.

Once, a kapota built his nest in the branch of a tree in a jungle. He lived in that nest with his mate for a while. Like grihastas, they were united in every way, by ardent love: always in each other's gaze, touching, loving, and in their minds, too.

The birds were inseparable. They slept together, sat together, flew together, played and ate together, happily among the trees, with no inkling of the peril that was about to overtake them.

The male dove was like a slave to his mate, for he was full of passion for her, and unrestrained; she had everything she wanted from him, even if he had to exert himself considerably to satisfy her wants.

She, in turn, was obedient and faithful to him, and soon there came the day when she laid her first eggs in their nest, while he watched her. In time, by the grace of the Lord Hari, the eggs cracked and beautiful little fledglings emerged, their limbs and feathers enchanting to their parents' fond eyes.

The loving parent birds raised their young with tender love; they heard their little doves chirp and twitter in small voices and were full of joy. The dove parents saw their babies flutter their soft, downy wings, they watched their unsteady awkward movements and their glad cries when they returned to the nest with food, and the kapotas' joy knew no bounds.

Fascinated by the Lord's maya, bound together by powerful thongs of attachment, the birds raised their young with grave anxiety and protectiveness, giving of themselves utterly.

One day, they went to forage for food in the forest and were away from the nest for longer than usual. A fowler, wandering through the forest, hunting, heard the shrill noises of the chicks; he saw them flutter their wings on the tree. He cast his net skilfully and tore them down from their height.

Just then the parent kapotas returned, with food in their beaks, eager to feed their young. The she-bird saw her babies lying on the forest floor, caught in the fowler's nest, screaming piteously. With a cry and never a thought for herself, she flew to them, and in a flash, she too was entangled in the cunning net.

The male dove now saw the mate he loved as he did himself and his young ones, whom he loved more than his life, hopelessly ensnared.

He cried aloud, in shock, in despair, 'Oh, I am lost! I am not yet sated with the joys of my life and my family and neither have I sought my spiritual evolution, which might help me now and in the next world.

Alas, my home, which was my dharma, artha and kama, is destroyed. My mate and I were so well suited; she was so loving, so pliant. But now she chose to leave this world with her young ones.

I cannot live in an empty nest, stricken with grief, without her and my children.'

The male kapota looked again at his family screeching and struggling, in their death throes. With a cry, he also plunged down into the net and died with them.

Now the savage fowler emerged from hiding, well satisfied with his day's work: he had caught the fledglings and the grown doves, too. He slung the net with the small corpses over his shoulder and went home.

So, O King, the grihasta who has not restrained his senses, but it entirely committed to his home, its concerns and pleasures, is always in danger of perishing – he and his family, as the kapotas did.

A human birth is a lofty one, in which the doors to the mansion of mukti lie open. If a jiva is born a human and still lives a life of total attachment to his family and mundane concerns, like the doves in the forest, the great Rishis look upon him as someone who falls from a pinnacle into an abyss of darkness," said Dattatreya to Yadu,'

Said Sri Krishna to Uddhava in Dwaraka," Sri Suka said.

DATTATREYA'S SERMON ON HIS GURUS

(*Continued*)

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "KRISHNA SAID,

'The Avadhuta went on, "Even as Swarga offers its sensual pleasures, Rajan, so does Naraka, hell, have its torments. The truly intelligent man does not pursue the lusts of his senses.

One should eat whatever comes to one by chance, regardless of its taste or quantity. One should eat like the python, without making any effort. The seeker goes hungry rather than chase after food. He should recognise that this is his prarabdha, his destiny, and must lie quiescent, as the python does, accepting his fate.

Even if he is able-bodied, with all his faculties intact, he should lie quietly where he is, his mind alive and vigilant to the final purpose of his life. This is the way of the python, my Guru.

The Muni must be like the sea, still and calm, but fathomless, profound, imperturbable in its plumbless depths, and constant. The Sage who is absorbed in the contemplation of Narayana is not enthralled by a plenitude of pleasure or dejected by its lack. He is like the ocean, always keeping within his bounds, not swelling or shrinking, regardless of whether water flows into him or evaporates.

When a man who has no restraint sees a woman, the Lord's chosen instrument of delusion, he is attracted by her and falls into the dark chasm of avidya. He is like the moth that flies into the fire, and dies.

Women, gold, jewellery, fine clothes: all these temptations of maya beckon to men as their objects of pleasure. Their fascination robs him of his judgement and binds him in attachment. He falls prey to his senses, as moths to flames, and perishes.

Let the Muni learn from the honeybee, and collect small gifts of alms, wandering from home to home, never taking so much from one that he burdens the grihastas, always accepting only enough to maintain his body.

Let the clever man sip from the essence of all the Shastras, as the honeybee does their nectar from every kind of flower.

The Sage must not keep the food he receives as alms for the night meal or the next day. His cupped palm should be his plate and his belly his vessel. But he does not store – anything – as the bee does.

A Muni should not allow a young woman to touch even his feet. He should have no contact even with the wooden image of a woman. For such contact will ensnare him, just as the cow elephant seduces the bull elephant.

The Sage does not become intimate with a woman, for she might prove to be his death. A stronger rival for her favours might kill him, for two tuskers will fight to the death over a female in rut.

As for the honey gatherer, he takes honey from bees – like the cunning man takes his hoarded wealth from a miser, who neither spends his money nor gives charity.

Ascetics eat the first portions of what the grihasta cooks in his home, food bought with the sweat of his brow. The honey gatherer eats the honey of the honeybee. For, the grihasta is enjoined by dharma to give the best of his food as bhiksha to holy mendicants. The Muni need never be anxious about his next meal.

A Sannyasi must never listen to ribald songs, for they can entangle him in the net of desire. Let him learn from the stag, which the hunter calls up and kills by mimicking the call of the hind. Why, the great Rishyashringa heard the songs of women, he saw their sensuous dances, and he was lost, becoming their plaything for then his lust ruled him. That is the lesson of my Guru the deer.

As for the fish, it dies by swallowing the bait with the hook craftily hidden in it. Men are destroyed by yielding to the temptations of the palate, for the sense of taste excites the mind as perhaps nothing else. Abstinence can subdue every craving, but it only sharpens the lust for fine food.

The man that has vanquished all his other senses cannot be termed a jitendriya until he has conquered his palate. Once that is done, every other sense is as good as vanquished.

Kshatriya, once there was a famous courtesan in the city of Videha, and her name was Pingala. I learnt a mighty lesson from her. Listen, I will tell you about it.

Wearing finery, one evening, this loose woman stood outside her door, ready to welcome any lover that wanted to buy her favours and enjoy them in private. She looked at the men passing by her house and felt certain that many handsome ones, and rich, would pay her well that night.

She was as greedy as she was seductive. Several men approached her. She took them in, and they paid her and went away. Being greedy, she was not satisfied, either with what she had earned or the clients who had enjoyed her.

Pingala would go in and emerge again to wait for the next customer. She always felt that a better, more handsome, and, most important, wealthier suitor would come along. She did not sleep until midnight.

Then, suddenly, as she stood alone under the stars, her greed unfulfilled, unfulfillable, a wave of disgust for this worldly life and its lust welled in her heart and swept over her in a wave, washing her heart clean. She was plunged deep in thought and felt at great peace.

Pingala sang a song at that new dawning of relinquishment in her spirit, which told of how vairagya is the sword that severs the bonds of desire that bind men's minds. Rajan, the man who does not have illumination will not renounce his ego. The man that does not possess dispassion will not abandon or even wish to abandon the feeling that he is the body and nothing but that.

Pingala sang, '*Aho me mohavitatim pashyatavijitatmanah; Ya ḳantadasatah ḳamam ḳamaye yen balisha.*

Santam sameepe ramanam ratipradamvittapradam nityamimam vihaya;
Akamadam dukhabhayadishokamohapradam tuchchamaham bhajegya.

Oh, look how foolish a woman like me is, who has no control over her mind! And my mind deluded to look to satisfy my lust with worthless men.

I abandoned the Great Lover, who dwells so near me, in my very heart, and ran after these petty ones, who can never gratify me, but who plunged me deep into grief, fear, anxiety and delusion.

Wretchedly and in vain I sought to earn a livelihood by selling myself to lustful, miserly, despicable men. Fool that I am, I thought I would find pleasure and wealth. Only a fool could seek her sanctuary in such a pathetic creature as a man – his body a pitiable hut, its ridgement a weakling spine, its rafters brittle ribs, its pillars mortal limbs, its walls and roof a thin covering of skin, hair and nails, and with nine permanent rents in it that are always leaking. Besides, this miserable thing is full of excrement, urine and other vile things.

This is the holy city of Videha and I am the only fool here, the only sinful woman, chasing after objects of love other than my Lord Achyuta, who gives himself to those that seek him as bhaktas.

The Supreme One, Achyuta, is the only friend, the inmost essence, the dearest, most precious lover and beloved of everyone. Now on, I will dedicate my body, my heart and soul to Him, and even as Sri Rama does, seek my satisfaction from Him and no other.

The joys of the flesh and the pleasures of lust, and the men and Devas through whom these can be had are all born and all of them die. They are all the puppets of fleeting time. What pleasure or refuge have these ever offered to the women that become their wives?

I must have done some punya in some other life of the past that Lord Vishnu has been gracious to me today and opened my eyes to reality. Suddenly, I have found detachment and serenity, and a spirit of renunciation fills me in a wave of peace. Ah, I am full of soft joy; surely Vishnu has blessed me.

If I were truly an unfortunate, who did not have the Lord's blessing and grace, I would not have become so dejected this night because I found such small pleasure and received hardly any money for it. Only with renunciation, welling from deep in the heart, can anyone hope to break the fetters of samsara – of home and wealth, of attachment to family, and to find eternal peace.

I humbly receive this blessing he has given me, in his great mercy. I renounce all my greed and lust, my every other desire, and seek shelter in Him. I shall be satisfied with whatever fate brings me, with faith in Narayana, and seek my joy and pleasure in the company of just this Lover, who is, why, the very Atman.

Who but the Lord Narayana will redeem the jiva fallen into samsara, the abyss of transmigrations, its spiritual eyes blinded by lusts of the senses, held firm in the jaws of time, the great serpent?

This universe is nothing but the jaws of that serpent. When a man realises that this is the truth of his predicament, he discovers renunciation. Then, his higher Self, the Paramatman, saves the jiva, liberates him from the jaws of death.'

And so the prostitute Pingala overcame her lust for lovers, and went in and slept peacefully. Desire is the wellspring of the sharpest sorrows and the absence of desire is the source of the most intense joy. So, the courtesan Pingala was my Guru; the moment she abandoned her desire, she found peace."

DATTATREYA'S SERMON ON HIS GURUS
(*Continued*)

DATTATREYA WENT ON, "THE MORE A MAN CRAVES AFTER ANY OBJECT of sensual gratification, the more grief and torment it brings him. The man who knows this and who possesses nothing, not even his own body or a sense of identity with it, finds infinite bliss.

Once an osprey, a kurara, which had a piece of meat, found itself being attacked by other birds of prey that had nothing to eat. It let go of the shred of flesh, and immediately the other birds left it alone, and in peace.

I do not care about being honoured or insulted; I do not have the anxieties of grihastas that own houses and children. I wander as I please, like a child, and all of my joy and my play I find in just the Atman.

Only the child, who takes no thought and has no purposes, but is carefree and lives in the moment, and the Sage that has grown past the three gunas of Prakriti are free from anxiety and live in joy.

Once, a suitor's family arrived in the home of a young girl with a proposal of marriage. The girl's elders were all away from the house so she received the visitors herself. Rajan, she had to give them something to eat, so she went into the back of the house and began to husk some paddy.

As she did this, the cheap shell bangles on her arms began to jangle loudly. She felt ashamed and was worried that the visitors would realise that she and her family were poor, for only a girl from a poor family would wear bangles made of shell and not gold. She broke her bangles, one by one, leaving just a pair on each arm.

When she began her husking again, even these made a sound. She broke another two bangles, leaving just one on each arm. Now when she husked the rice, there was no sound.

As I wander the Earth, I learn lessons from life. From the girl I learnt a deep lesson, indeed – that when many people live together there is always discord. If there are even two, they will spend their time in idle conversation, and will not meditate upon the Atman. That is why, O King, I prefer to be and to travel alone. I am like the single bangle on the young girl's arm, and I do not talk to anyone.

The aspirant must master a yogic asana, in which he can sit. He must control his vital prana, and fix his mind in dhyana upon a single object upon which he meditates. With vairagya, he restrains the mind's tendencies to wander outward as well as to fall asleep. With practice, he learns to concentrate the mind in vigil and alertness upon the object of dhyana.

The object of dhyana must be the Atman, the Final Being, in whose absorption all karma gradually melts away, and the predilection toward karma, for all action. Such dhyana causes sattva to dominate, and in time, rajas and tamas, which agitate the mind or make it inert, fade away. When they have gone, the mind itself subsides into quietude, like a fire that has consumed all its fuel.

This condition of the mind can be compared to that of a blacksmith fashioning an arrowhead. He is so absorbed in what he is doing, that if even a king and his retinue pass by, he does not look up or become aware of them. The Muni absorbed in the Atman as pure consciousness has no awareness of duality – he does not experience the 'outside' as being distinct from the 'inside'; he does not experience the objects of the external world.

Like my master the serpent, the Muni must be a lone wanderer, homeless, always alert, living in secret caves, a solitary, hard to know by any external signs, with no attendants or disciples, extremely reserved in his speech, if he speaks at all.

When the span of one's life is so short and uncertain, how foolish it is to build a house – such an arduous task. Learn from the snake, which has no home, but slides into holes in the ground that other creatures make and lives in them. A Yogi, too, should not have a home of his own but live temporarily in the houses of others.

When the Kalpa ends, Narayana, the One God, destroys with his power of time the universe, which he created with his maya. When his Kaala has stilled sattva, rajas and tamas, He then exists as the Only Reality, his own support, the Cause of causes that remains when all else ceases to be – He the master of Purusha and Prakriti, Soul and Nature.

He transcends all relative existence, high and low, and is Satchitananda and limitless freedom, the ocean of pristine being and bliss.

When the moment comes for the next Creation, by the Lord's own will, Kaala, Time, stirs his Maya of sattva, rajas, and tamas. These gunas manifest as the Sutratman, the pervasive Spirit, also called the Mahatattva.

The Maharishis all look upon the Sutratman, comprising the three gunas, as the Creator of this vast and teeming universe. The worlds are threaded upon him like pearls on a string and it is he that causes the jiva to transmigrate from life to life.

The spider weaves its web, extruding it from its own body. It then dwells and sports in the web for a while, before abandoning it and withdrawing. So does the Great God, Maheshwara, emanate, spread, and withdraw the universe – by himself.

If a man fixes his mind upon anything, from whatever cause – love, hate, or fear – he attains to the condition of that object of his fervour. There is a wasp that takes a worm into its hole and terrifies it by the buzzing of its wings, until the worm, by magical osmosis, turns itself into a wasp, as well, transmuting without its old body dying.

These are my Gurus, and the lessons I have learnt from them. Now listen to what I have learnt from my own body.

The body is the Guru that taught me the lessons of dispassion and discrimination. Through countless birth and deaths, and their fruit – ceaseless sorrow – it taught me vairagya, detachment. It is with my body, now, that I meditate upon the Truth and practise discernment. Yet, I wander the Earth with no attachment for my body. I am aware that it belongs to others – the dogs and jackals that will feast upon it when I die.

By the sweat of his brow, a man makes a living and supports his wife, children, cattle, and servants – all to serve his body, with which he identifies himself. Finally, the body dies, leaving behind, like a tree, the karmic seeds of other births and bodies.

Just as the grihasta who has more than one wife is harassed by their contrary demands on him, a man is plagued by the ceaseless demands of his senses. His palate forever cries out to eat fine food, his thirst cries out to drink, his lust demands to mate, his skin to touch soft objects. His belly craves food, his nose to sniff fine scents, his eyes to rove over all things that please them, his ear to hear pleasant sounds, and his organs of action are forever restless, urging him from karma to karma.

When creation began, God brought forth the different species with his power – trees, serpents, animals, birds, insects, fish, and all the rest. He was not satisfied, and created human beings, with a body and an intelligence that could intuit the Brahman.

To be born human is a rare, rare blessing, which comes only after numberless births and deaths in the other species. Despite its evanescence, it is only after being born human that a jiva can attain to the higher values of the spirit, and finally to mukti.

As long as his body lasts, the Muni strives for the Final Goal – liberation from samsara, the cycle of transmigrations. Not to strive thus, despite being born human, is a dreadful shame and loss: because the pleasures of the senses are available to the other species, too.

So, O King, I learnt diverse lessons from my many Gurus, until detachment and dispassion dawned on me, and the light of discernment. So, having established myself in the Atman, I wander the Earth, without attachments, without any sense of ahamkara, possessions or feeling that I am a doer, bound by any karma.

One Guru can never teach you the entire truth. Of course, God is the Supreme Guru, but there are many Upagurus, lesser preceptors, that can teach one the many different aspects of the spirit and spiritual evolution. The subject is profound; there is nothing beyond the profundity of the Single, undivided Brahman. But different Sages have all expounded Its

Nature diversely, in different scriptures, and also the means to attain to the Final Truth."

So said the Avadhuta Dattatreya,' said Krishna to Uddhava. 'King Yadu worshipped him with prostrations, and the Muni of plumbless wisdom then went on his way. As he had come, fetched by chance, so he went, too, not knowing where fate would take him.

And Yadu, the ancestor of my clan, the Yadavas, became free from all his attachments and was deeply entrenched in the joy of his Atman,' The Lord said," said Suka Deva to Parikshit.

THE LIMITATIONS OF VEDIC RITUALISM

SRI SUKA SAID, "KRISHNA SAID, 'FOLLOW YOUR SWADHARMA, AS I HAVE taught it, in the traditions of your kula and varnashrama, without any attachment for the fruit of what you do.

The man who has purified his heart sees clearly how the karma of those bound by the senses, who work always with an eye on the gains of what they do, brings them nothing but the opposite of what they seek. They find grief instead of happiness.

Even as the dreams of a sleeping man are unreal, the daydreams of a deluded man are insubstantial and in vain, being essentially unstable. The same law applies to the diversity of the objects that the waking mind and senses experience – they are illusory, too.

My bhaktas engage themselves in karma that fosters the growth of renunciation. This consists in a daily discipline of work, nitya, which forms part of their dharma, as well as acts of dana, charity. My devotees avoid other karma, rituals, and work, which are undertaken to fulfil selfish ends. He that treads the path of the true seeker need not concern himself with the ritual or the commandments of the Veda.

However, he must always adhere to the moral laws called Yama: like restraining the senses, having no possessions, non-violence, speaking the truth. He also follows the occasional codes of conduct called Niyama, to whatever extent he can, in the different circumstances in which he might find himself. These include charity, penance and silence.

The seeker should find a Guru, who has realised Me, and serve his master as an embodiment of Me.

While he serves his Guru, the sishya should be humble and perform any task that is asked of him. He must not be contentious, ever, but skilful at whatever he does. He must not have any possessions or attachments. His relationship with his Guru should be friendly and loving. He must be calm and thoughtful in what he does, his speech restrained, his heart free from envy, and eager in his quest for truth.

The Atman is the same in all beings, and it is meaningless and foolish to think of one person or object as being more one's own than another. When the seeker realises this, he abandons his attachments toward his wife, children, his house, lands, his larger family, his wealth, and all the rest that once possessed him. He knows that his is the goal that is common to all.

The fire burns and illumines its fuel, but remains distinct from it, though it assumes the qualities of the wood it burns. So, also, the Atman, the Self-luminous One within the body is apart from all the objects and beings of the experienced world, all the sukshma and sthula forms, the material and spirit bodies.

The Atman assumes the various conditions of the body, but remains distinct from every body it assumes. The Soul has no birth, growth, size, different forms, or death.

What is known as the body, the deha, is only something created by the gunas of Prakriti. When the jiva identifies with these, it becomes entangled in the wheel of samsara, the cycles of births, deaths and transmigrations. The knowledge and illumination of the real nature of the Atman makes an end to this delusion, and sets the jiva free.

So, what one must seek is the Spirit, which is always apart from the body, the Antaryamin. When you understand this distinction, you disassociate yourself from the sthula sarira, then the sukshma sarira, the material and spirit bodies – until you find what You really are, the splendid, eternal Atman.

The Guru is the wood at the base; the sishya rests upon him. The arani, the kindling stick, is the Guru's instruction, and the fire that springs up is enlightenment, full of bliss and knowledge.

The pure fire of spiritual illumination, which the Guru gives his sishya, consumes all the bonds caused by the gunas of Prakriti; it finally burns up the gunas themselves. Then it subsides like an ordinary fire that has made ashes of its fuel. All the vrittis, the modes of the mind, subside; then only immaculate Chit, absolute, taintless consciousness and bliss remain – Singular, without perceiver and perceived.

There exist numberless jivas, engaged in karma of many kinds and reaping the fruit thereof, both good and evil. The worlds, time, the Veda and these jivas are all eternal. The objects they experience also recur, eternally, in a stream, and intelligence in its various recurrent forms is also eternal.

This is what the Mimamsakas believe, Uddhava, and they say that the consciousness of transmigrations is preferable to the rest and surrender of moksha!

Even if they are right, it is obvious that there is no freedom or free will in what they believe – jivas must forcibly be born and die in many forms, ceaselessly, for their consciousness to continue to exist. Those that experience pleasure and pain have no choice; what happiness can the utterly dependent, why, the slave, hope to enjoy?

The brahmanas and the great Vedic ritualists are not always happy; neither are the ignorant that perform no rites plunged in ceaseless misery. The embodied are naturally subject to joy and woe. The ritualists' vanity is meaningless; hollow is their boast that they find unalloyed joy by their rituals.

Even if we accept that they do find the means to keep sorrow away and live in joy, what about death? Surely, they do not keep death away!

How can any wealth or enjoyment make a man truly happy, when he knows that death is round the corner? It is like a condemned criminal saying that he is happy to enjoy the pleasures of the senses, when he will soon be led to the hangman.

The heavens that we hear about, which beckon from beyond this world, are all tainted with the same evils that the world is. They are without exception subject to enmities, jealousy, transitoriness, and finality. There are always other worlds beyond each of them, better worlds and higher.

The finest fruit and pleasures of all these realms are fleeting, dying. Also, countless obstacles appear in the way of their enjoyment before they can be savoured.

Let me tell you how the fruit of Vedic rituals are all temporary and perishable, even if the rites are performed blemishlessly. A Vedic ritualist worships a Deva and attains to Swarga. There he enjoys the celestial pleasures he earned with his yagnas.

He finds himself in an unearthly mansion, filled with every exquisite and brilliant pleasure. Gandharva musicians and incomparable Apsaras attend on him. He travels anywhere he pleases in a vimana, adorned with fine bells, which flies quick as thoughts at his very wish. He goes about lost in the deep, fragrant and wonderful embraces of the nymphs of Devaloka.

The jiva forgets that his perfect pleasure must soon come to an end. He can dwell in Swarga for only as long as his punya lasts; as soon as his punya is exhausted, he will fall again, down into the lower realms. Time will thrust him down, inevitably, protesting in vain.

Other jivas, falling into evil company, abandon themselves to wanton lives. They become slaves to their senses, full of greed and lust. They harm their fellow creatures – sacrificing animals, against scriptural injunctions, to elemental gods, demons, and ghosts.

Upon dying, such fallen jivas plunge down into purgatories and hells. They are punished for their crimes, becoming like vegetables, their minds overwhelmed by tamasic darkness. When his sins are paid for, the jiva acquires another body, only to repeat his crimes, and again, upon dying, finds himself back in hell. What joy can there ever be in this dreadful repetition?

All the worlds and their ruling Gods, who live for a Kalpa, live in fear of me. Brahma, whose life lasts two Parardhas is also under my sway; he, also, fears me.

Prompted by the gunas and not the Atman, the senses, which are products of the gunas, engage in karma. The jiva identifies with the evolutes of the gunas, such as the body and the mind, and reaps the fruit of karma.

Only as long as these manifestations of the gunas – ahamkara, the body, and the rest – exist, the Atman experiences plurality and bondage. As long as there is a perception of division and of multifarious creation, the jiva fears Ishwara, whom it sees as Kaala, devourer of all things.

Thus, certainly, the ritualists, who emphasise the multiplicity of jivas, are obsessed with sorrow, and death and its terror.

When a new Kalpa begins, with the stirring of the gunas in repose and equilibrium, I am known by several names, by the ignorant, all of which reflect only a particular aspect of Me. I am called Kaala as Time, Atman as Soul, Aagama as Scripture, Loka as the World, Svabhaava as Nature, and as Dharma, righteousness.'

Uddhava asked, 'Lord, perhaps the Atman in itself is One, without division, when it is not manifest. Yet, how do we say that the Atman is not bound when it identifies itself with the body and the senses. If, originally and inherently, the Soul is free and unbound, how and when did it come to be thus shackled?

How do I recognise an enlightened man? How does he live and conduct himself? How can one tell a realised soul apart? How does he eat, excrete, lie down, sit, or walk?

Achyuta, no one can answer these difficult questions better than you can. How can the same Atman, as I have been taught, be eternally bound, yet always free? Ah, I am confused and disturbed!' said Uddhava,"

Sri Suka told the king.

OF FREEDOM AND BONDAGE

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "KRISHNA SAID TO UDDHAVA, 'BONDAGE AND liberation are not for the Atman Himself, but only for the jiva, the body and the mind, which are of the gunas and based upon my maya, as are the gunas themselves.

Maya does not affect Me, and hence it does not affect the Atman, which I am. So there is no bandhanam or moksha for the Atman. I do, indeed, know the answer to your questions better than anyone, and this is what I say to you.

Sorrow, fascination, delusion, pleasure and pain, birth, death, and every other human experience are all just maya, like dreams for the jiva. Only the Atman is real, not these – they are illusory, impermanent.

Uddhava, vidya is knowledge that brings moksha to the jiva, while avidya, ignorance, binds him in samsara – from the beginning of time. Both these are aspects of my maya. They are manifestations of my power.

Most intelligent friend, primordial vidya brings mukti to the jiva, who is part of me, while ancient avidya binds him.

Let me tell you about the difference between the jiva and Ishwara, one bound and the other free, both dwelling in the same body, but one in sorrow and the other in eternal, immutable bliss.

They are two birds, Ishwara and jiva, both of the same order of conscious beings, and friends through eternity; both dwell in the same nest upon the tree that is the body, the tree of karma. One, the jiva, eats the fruit from the tree, while the other does not but is splendorous, and thrives in joy.

Ishwara is without desire to eat the fruit of karma. He knows his own nature and that of the world is, in essence, Satchitananda. But the jiva, who claims the fruit for his own and eats, is ignorant. He is plunged in primeval avidya, and bound in darkness, while Ishwara, who has pristine vidya, is always free.

Upon waking, the sleeper ceases to identify with his dream body. So, also, upon waking to enlightenment, the Sage, though he still dwells in his body, does not identify with it. He continues to be in the body, but not of it. However, the ignorant man, though he has as little to do with his body as the enlightened one, identifies himself with it, even as a dreamer thinks he is his dream self.

When the senses of the enlightened man have contact with their objects – both products of Prakriti – the Sage remains unaffected by the experience; he remains transcendent. He knows, actively, that the gunas are at play with themselves, as subject and objects. He is imperturbable.

But the ignorant man identifies not only with his body, a creation of his past karma, but is embroiled in what his senses do, thinking that he does all this.

The man of illumination also sits, walks, eats, bathes, lies down, sees, hears, touches, smells, but he is not bound by whatever he does because he remains perfectly detached, always. His senses function like any man's, but he himself is a witness to, and not a deluded participant in what they do.

He is like the sun, the sky and the wind. He is seen to possess a body, but is as unaffected by the actions of his body, the creation of Prakriti. The sky pervades, but all that it pervades does not change it. The sun is reflected in water, but unchanged by its own reflection, by the water in which it is reflected. The wind flows everywhere, but nowhere is it bound.

The Muni sharpens the great sword of insight with fervid vairagya and cuts away all his doubts. He terminates every thought of duality, and multiplicity, even as the dreamer does his dreams upon waking.

His vital energy, senses, mind and intellect are transformed; they are no longer motivated by desire, but become free. The Sage owns a body, but is not enslaved by its urges and demands.

Regardless of whether evil men injure his body, or if good men adore him, he remains unperturbed.

A Muni will not praise those that favour him by what they say or do; he will not be offended by those that cross him. The enlightened man's vision does not distinguish between pleasant and unpleasant experiences; he is equaminous at all times.

He does nothing, speaks little, and does not involve himself with mundane issues, good or bad. He lives immersed in the bliss of the Atman. Yet, to men of the world, ignorant ones, he might seem to be a mad man.

A man might be an adept in the Sabdabrahman, a master of the scriptures. However, if his mind has not been subsumed in the Parabrahman, by tapasya, his scriptural knowledge is a hollow thing, and in vain. He is like one that keeps a sterile cow, hoping to milk it.

Sorrow, and more sorrow, is the fate of a man that keeps a cow that has stopped calving, an unfaithful wife, a body that is a slave to another, an unworthy son. Grief is the destiny of the man that garners wealth but does not purify himself by giving dana, who has artistic or literary gifts that he does not use in serving the Lord!

Ah my friend, a wise man does not concern himself with arid literature, which does not refer to my glory, describe my incarnations of divine play, and my glory expressed as creation, nurture and the dissolution.

The seeker, instead, withdraws from every other concern, and dissolves his purified heart in me – the Indweller, the Pervasive One.

If you cannot fix your mind with one-pointedness upon the Brahman, then live your life as an offering to me, dedicate whatever you do to me, with no selfish motive.

Uddhava, listen to the Purana of my deeds through the ages, sing about them in the songs of bhakti. Know I am the Avatara of God and think of me over and over as being That. Think of everything that I did and identify with me in your heart.

Depend just upon me, and offer all your worldly dharma, artha and kama to me, whatever form they take, for my satisfaction. If you offer your life to me, you will find unwavering bhakti to me, who am the Eternal One.

Seek out the Rishis of the world, for they engender bhakti in men's hearts. Those that worship me with this bhakti acquired from the Sages attain effortlessly to the spiritual goal that the Munis reveal.'

Uddhava asked, 'Lord of sacred renown, of what kind of Sadhu do you approve? Which sort of bhakti that the Munis teach pleases you best?

Lord of all the Gods, Lord of Worlds, O Lord of the Universe, I prostrate before you and beg you, answer me this, for I am your bhakta and seek refuge in you.

You are the Parabrahman. Like akasa, nothing taints you. You are the Purusha who are beyond Prakriti. For your divine sport, from no compulsion but your free will, you have incarnated in this body.'

Krishna said, 'The Sadhu is kind; he never injures anyone. He is established in the truth, patient, pure at heart and in his mind, unperturbed in joy and sorrow, and compassionate and helpful to all, as best he can be.

He has no passions, no lust, and is a jitendriya, a master of his senses. He is taintless, detached, serene, unselfish in whatever he does, without possessions, firm, upright, eats sparingly, is conscientious, and always devoted to me.

The Sadhu is vigilant at all times, and reposed. He is perfectly brave in every situation, for he has subdued the six weaknesses of his body – hunger and thirst, grief and infatuation, old age and death. He expects no respect from others, but is respectful to everyone. He has great vitality and stamina, true wisdom beyond bookish learning, and is friendly and kindly toward all.

He who well knows the punya in performing his swadharma as ordained by me, and the paapa in neglecting it, yet relinquishes it to immerse himself in just bhakti – he is the best of Sadhus.

It does not matter whether a man knows that I am infinite, glorious, majestic, or about all my other qualities. Let him worship me with all his heart, and simply, thinking of me as being his own, his sole support, and he shall be the greatest of my bhaktas.

Here are other forms of worship – to see, touch, and to adore idols and images of me, saligramas for example. Particularly, to serve and to revere my bhaktas in whom I dwell. To praise and honour my deeds and my attributes.

Listen to my Puranas with unwavering absorption; meditate upon me always. Offering everything that you receive at my feet. Surrender yourself, your family, all that you own to me, with the humility of a servant for his master.

Sing of me as the Avatara; speak of my life as being divine. Keep your vows on the days that are sacred to me, like Janamashtami. Celebrate joyfully in my temples on these holy days, with song and dance, and satsangha, gatherings of devotees.

Take out processions in your streets on the day of the annual temple celebration and give much charity on that day. Become an initiate into the ways to adore me according to the Veda and the Tantras. Keep your fast on days like the Ekadasi.

Be eager to build temples to me, and install my images in them. Offer these idols the proper garlands of flowers. Set the temples in groves of sacred trees, with every amenity for the bhaktas that come to worship – let them have grounds around them, sheds and shelters for sleep and eating and for recreation, too.

Let the bhakta sweep, clean, renovate and adorn my temples with deep humility and sincerity, like a servant. Let towns grow up around them.

Root out vanity, hypocrisy and the inclination to boast about one's own pious deeds. All these that I have told you about, Uddhava, are ways of practising bhakti. Once something has been offered, be it not a lamp or wick used in a ceremony of aradhana, it should not be used again, but a fresh offering made.

Let my bhakta offer me what he regards as most precious to himself; from that offering he shall derive the greatest benefit and blessing – infinite grace.

There are eleven temples in which I can be worshipped – the Sun, the Fire, Brahmanas, Cows, my bhaktas, the Sky, Air, Water, the Earth, the Atman in one's own heart and body, and the agglomeration of living creatures.

Those that worship me in the Sun chant Vedic mantras in praise of Surya; in Agni, I am worshipped with havis, burnt offerings; in Brahmanas, I am adored with hospitality; in Cows, by feeding them grass and by treating them with great tenderness.

In a Vishnubhakta, I am worshipped by treating him as your dearest friend. In the Sky and the Heart, I am adored with dhyana; in the Air, by meditating upon it as sacred or mokhya-prana. In Water, I am worshipped with libations mixed with sesame seeds, rice grains, saffron, and other auspicious things.

In the Earth, levelled, squared and purified for sacrifice, I am adored with Nyasa – the ritual placement of mantras. In one's own body, I am worshipped with the enjoyments and comforts that the Shastras allow. And in all beings and creation I am adored as the Antaryamin, the Indweller, the Holy Ground.

These are the sacral naves in which the seeker should meditate upon my four-armed irradiant Form, generating peace, and holding the Panchajanya, the Sudarshana Chakra, the Kaumodaki, and the thousand-petalled Lotus of the Soul in each of my four hands. The aspirant restrains his mind and meditates upon this Form of mine with perfect serenity and devotion.

Whoever worships me in these eleven shrines, with rituals and ishtapoorta, charity, shall find deep faith. However, nothing causes such powerful faith as associating with holy Munis. Their very company brings intense bhakti to the seeker. For I am the sole refuge of these surrendered ones; they, verily, are me.

This last is the most profound secret, Uddhava, and not easily heard in this world. But you are my friend and my bhakta, so listen and I will explain it to you in detail,' said Krishna softly."

SATSANGHA: THE ASSOCIATION WITH HOLY MEN

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "KRISHNA SAID,

'There are a myriad of spiritual disciplines – the eight-limbed yoga, philosophical inquiry and reflection, virtue, Vedic study, penance and austerity, nishkama karma, the performance of one's duty with no desire for its fruit, the performance of Vedic rituals, charitable works, the giving of gifts, the keeping of vows and fasts, tirthayatras, performing yagnas, chanting hermetic mantras, restraining the mind, Yama, and Niyama, restraining the body.

But none of the above brings a seeker as close to me, and quickly, and bind me to him with bonds of love, as does satsangha – the association with holy men. For satsangha subtly roots out every worldly attachment from men's minds.

In the different yugas, many beings whom rajas and tamas ruled still attained to me – among them Asuras, Rakshasas, animals, birds, Gandharvas, Apsaras, Nagas, Siddhas, Charanas, Guhyakas, Vidyadharas, even women, vaisyas, sudras and untouchables too. All these came to me by associating with holy men, enlightened souls.

Vritrasura attained mukti, as did Prahlada, Vrishaparva, Mahabali, Banasura, Mayaa Danava, Vibheeshana, Sugriva, Hanuman, Jambavan, Gajendra the elephant king, Jatayu, Tuladharana the vaisya, Dharmavyadha the vetala, Kubja, the gopikas and the wives of the Brahmana ritualists.

None of these studied the Vedas or served Vedic masters as sishyas. None of them performed tapasya; they came to me through their encounters with Munis. For these meetings sparked alive bhakti in their hearts and riding that devotion many a simple, ignorant being attained to me – the gopis, cows, trees, beasts, serpents – and with ease.

There are seekers that try to reach me with rigorous tapasya, with severe penance and yoga, with deep metaphysical inquiry, with great charity, keeping stern vows, every kind of austerity, elaborate yagnas, Vedic study and renunciation. These often do not find me, but they that discovered the way of bhakti as imparted by holy Sages, those came to me, invariably.

When Akrura brought Rama and me to Mathura, the gopikas, who loved me as their very lives, could hardly bear to be apart from me. Nothing comforted them in my absence.

Ah my friend, nights that passed like moments when we were together, making love and dancing the raasalila in Vrindavana, now seemed like Kalpas to them.

When a Sage enters into samadhi, or a river the ocean, they lose their identity, their name and form. So, too, the gopis were absorbed in me and had no sense of their own selves, let alone their families.

They were passionately attached to me, sexually, Uddhava, for they saw me only as their lover and did not know who I truly am. Yet, they found the Parabrahman by being with me in Vrindavana. Hundreds of thousands of women found moksha through their ardour for me.

Uddhava, abandon your dependence on the scriptures and all that they enjoin, their laws and what they prohibit. Forget everything that you have learnt from the Veda and the Shastras, and what you still hope to learn. Give up the pravritti and nivritti karmas.

Surrender to me – your body, heart, mind and soul, your very being – for I am God, the omniscient One, the eternal essence in every embodied being. Surrender and you shall find my grace and pass beyond fear forever; you, also, shall find mukti.'

Uddhava said, 'Yogeshwareshawara! I hear what you say but all my doubts still torment my heart. Why, I listen to you and I am more confused than ever.

You just asked me to perform my swadharma, but now you tell me to abandon the way of the scriptures and their injunctions. Earlier you spoke to me about the Singular Brahman, but now you tell me to love you as a bhakta, give you my heart and soul, surrender to you.'

Said Krishna, 'The Brahman manifests Himself in the subtle chakras along the stem of the spine. Blending with prana as Naadabrahman, He enters the lowest chakra, the Muladhara, as Paraa.

Next he assumes the vibrations of thought, called Pasyanti and Madhyama, in the Manipura and Visuddhi chakras. He rises to become audible, with Matra, syllables, Swara, accents, and Varna or speech, and now He is known as Vaikhari.

With friction and the help of the wind, the spark from the arani twigs ignites, catches, and when the sacrificial oblations are poured into it, blazes up in the yagna fire. So, too, the realm of sacred sound is an expression of me.

Also, what the hand and feet do, the rectum and the sexual organs, and the other organs of the senses, the mind, the three gunas, and Prakriti – all these are expressions of me.

In the beginning, Ishwara was unmanifest and alone. He was one, with no second beside him. He became the foundation of the gunas and of manifold Prakriti, and Origin of the Lotus of the Universe. He manifests himself infinitely, under the influence of Kaala, Time: rather as a seed grows into a plant or tree, with a trunk or stem, many branches, flowers, leaves, and fruit, when it is planted in suitable ground.

A cloth exists because of the thread from which it is woven. The thread that forms the warp and woof of the fabric of this universe is Ishwara; it has no existence without him.

Enduring through eternity the tree of life yields the many flowers of earthly pleasures and the fruit of moksha.

The tree of the universe has two seeds: punya and paapa. Its roots are beyond count – all the desires. The three gunas are its three trunks; its five great boughs are the elements, the Panchamahabhuta. It has five different saps: the perceptions of five senses. Eleven branches this tree has: the ten senses of cognition and action, and the mind the eleventh.

Two birds of fine plumage dwell in the great tree, Ishwara and the Jiva. The tree has three layers of bark: the three humours, vaata, pitta, and kapha: wind, bile, and phlegm. The highest twigs of the tree reach up to brush the sun.

The vultures of the Bhuvana, the jungle that is this world, eat one kind of fruit, which causes sorrow and suffering. These are selfish, worldly men, driven by greed and lust. Then there are the swans, which eat the other fruit that brings everlasting joy. These are the Sages of discernment, men of renunciation, who seek moksha.

The swan, the hamsa, knows that apparently multifarious existence is just the Paramatman who has manifested himself through his Yogamaya. He has learnt this from his Guru and he has his Guru's blessing. The Sage has understood the true import of the Veda.

The wise man serves his Guru assiduously, and gains fervent bhakti. He sharpens the axe of gyana with this devotion. Armed with that axe and with no hesitation, he hacks open the ego, prison of the jiva, and attains to the Brahman.

Once this is accomplished, you can discard the weapon of knowledge, for it has served its final purpose. The illumined man does not need to practise the rigours of austerity anymore.'

Thus said Krishna to Uddhava," Sri Suka said to the Raja.

THE SONG OF THE HAMSA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "THE LORD WENT ON,

'Uddhava, the three gunas, sattva, rajas, and tamas, do not belong to the Atman. They are only the essences of which the buddhi, the mind, is formed. If you develop sattva in your being, it will overcome and illumine the other two lower gunas and they will disappear. When this is done, then sattva can be made still, reduced to its essential condition, which is Peace.

When sattva dominates in a being, it disposes him toward bhakti and love for me, who are the Atman. The greatest bhakti evolves from the association of sattva and all things belonging to that guna.

The supremacy of sattva leads to the destruction of rajas and tamas, and with this the tendency to sin is extinguished. Thereon, inherent bhakti wells up naturally in the purified heart.

The scriptures, water, companions, place, time, karma, initiation, dhyana, mantras, samskaras or rituals of purification – these ten determine the influence of the three gunas in a man. All these are found to exist in three forms, each associated with a different guna.

What the Sages commend as being spiritually beneficial is invariably sattvik. What they condemn is tamasic, and what they ignore, rajasic.

To develop sattva in himself, a man should associate with the ten sattvika varieties of the above. Devotion and knowledge will develop from such association. Then the deep memory of one's own true spiritual nature wells up in the heart and breaks the bonds of material darkness.

Bamboos rub against one another in the wind and set themselves ablaze. The fire consumes the forest, then subsides. So, too, the fire of the spiritual disciplines, which a jiva's mind-body continuum – a product of the gunas – practises, finally consumes the very body and mind and then subsides into infinite peace.'

Uddhava said, 'Krishna, men are well aware that the pursuit of sensual pleasure leads only to danger and misery. Yet, they ignore the suffering and grief that is in store for them and chase after the lusts of their senses even like dogs, donkeys, and goats: mindless beasts. Why is this, Lord?'

Krishna said, 'The ignorant man identifies himself absolutely with his body. This causes the sattva from which his mind first grew to be ruled by potent rajas.

When rajas rules, the mind schemes to achieve mortal ends; it plans ceaselessly to overcome obstacles. The heart broods constantly over desires for possessions, of every kind.

Losing self-control, urged irresistibly on by rajas, the man helplessly follows his lusts and does what must inevitably bring him to grief. He well knows this, but cannot stop himself.

Yet, even the man enslaved and governed by rajas and tamas: if he does not become disheartened but makes an effort to restrain his wayward senses, to understand that what he does is evil, he shall slowly succeed in turning away from sin. Let him begin to practise dhyana.

Let him leave carelessness and sloth behind, master posture and control his breath. Let him develop patience and direct his mind toward me, in single-minded meditation.

I taught my sishyas Sanaka and the others that the highest Yoga is to draw the mind away from all the objects of the senses, inward, and to fix all your thought upon me.'

Uddhava said, 'Kesava, when did you teach Sanaka and the others this Yoga? How did you do it? I want to hear all about it.'

Krishna said, 'Sanaka and his brother Rishis were Brahma's sons, born immaculately from his mind. Once they questioned their father about the subtlest reaches of Yoga, in its highest form.

Sanaka said, "Ruled by desire, the mind naturally involves itself with the objects of the senses. And these enter into the mind as impressions and even dispositions. Lord, how can the seeker, who strives to conquer the senses, ever hope to withdraw the mind from the sway of the senses?"

Brahma is the Lord of all the Gods, Self-born and the Creator of all the living. But he was so preoccupied with his creation that even he did not grasp the real import of this question. He did not have an answer.

Brahma thought of me, and I appeared before him as a Hamsa, a Swan.

When Sanaka and the others saw me, they came to prostrate at my feet. With Brahma standing there as well, the Sages asked, "Who are you?" Listen to what I said to those Munis who were, indeed, seekers after the Truth.

I said, "Holy Ones, how is the question 'Who are you?' of any relevance when the Atman is not many but eternally One? How can I answer your question?

Even if your question pertains to the body, it is meaningless. The bodies of all the living, even the Devas, are made of the Panchabhutas, the five elements. These are not apart from the Brahman. Thus, all bodies are not apart from their Cause, the Brahman; essentially they are all the same.

All that the eyes see, words describe, and the other senses perceive – all of it is Me. Munis, there exists nothing that is not me, or that is apart from me.

Children, the mind enters into the objects of the senses and they enter the mind as impressions; they interpenetrate, delusionally. Mind and body are only the illusory garments that clothe the Atman, which I Am.

By repeated contact, the objects of the senses enslave the mind, and these establish their hold as familiar impressions. Both the objects of the senses and the mind can be conquered in only one way: by seeing that they are parts of me, that they have no independent existence.

The states of waking, sleep and dreaming are not conditions of the Atman, but only of the intellect. The jiva, too, is apart from these states; he is their witness.

As long as the bondage of the three states is projected upon the Atman by the buddhi, it is the cause of samsara, the grand delusion that attributes the functions of the gunas to the Atman. Instead seek me out, who am the fourth state of Being, Turiya, the transcendent truth. Find me and you shall dissolve illusion and become free. Once freedom dawns, the mind spontaneously withdraws from the sense objects.

Realising it to be the cause of misery, the seeker must abhor ahamkara, the ego that obscures the pristine and eternally blissful experience of the Soul. Once he sees this clearly, he should establish himself firmly in the fourth condition of being, which is the Lord Vaasudeva, me, and be free from the fear of samsara.

As long as the seeker does not pass beyond the notion of diversity, he is as one asleep, unawakened though he might appear to be awake. He is like a somnambulist.

All things other than the Atman are delusions, having no reality of their own. The body, the world and its institutions, all the means and ends and missions associated with the body and its delusional world is based upon this notional and false multiplicity. The varnasrama, with its duties and religious practises, the heavenly lokas that might be attained for a time through these: all of these are but dreams, illusions with no basis in reality.

The One that experiences and enjoys the world of the senses while awake, impresses in his heart the same world while he dreams, and withdraws from all perceptions in deep sleep – he is the Self, the Witness and Lord of the body-mind continuum, which the gunas produce.

The seeker should realise that the three states are manifestations of the Prakriti's gunas, which I create with my maya. Let him sharpen the sword of his understanding by clear reason and by learning from Sages, and then sever the doubt in his heart at their very root. Let him surrender to me, who dwell in his heart.

This world is truly like a dream, because it is projected by the mind; it is mortal, and fleeting. It is very like the ring of fire created by a firebrand whirled in a circle. The Single Consciousness, Chitta, appears as the three states of waking, sleep, and dreaming, and all that they contain. This apparently diverse world is only the process of Prakriti, which is merely a projection of my maya, my power of deep mystery.

Let the seeker withdraw from all karma, renounce every thought of deriving pleasure from any object of desire. Let him immerse himself in the bliss of his Atman and become perfectly quiescent.

Yet, now and again, he will continue to experience the multifarious world of delusions, this because of his karma of past lives. But it will not attract or enslave him, since he will not perceive it as being real anymore, but illusory. The experience will persist, but as of a dream, until his karma is exhausted.

An enlightened man is not aware of the body, by which he came to freedom – whatever it does because of prarabdha, where it comes and goes, what it does or not: rather as a drunken man is hardly aware whether the cloth round his waist is secure or has fallen away!

As long as the prarabdha karma that caused his present embodiment is not exhausted, the Sage's body will continue to live. But he that has attained to the condition of samadhi will see the body and the world that it experiences as a man awake does the images of his dreams.

Wise and learned Munis," said the splendid Hamsa, "this is the quintessence and the most hermetic secret of both Yoga and Samkhya. As for me, I am Yagana, Mahavishnu, come to teach you the science of the Spirit.

I am the goal, the foundation, and the inspiration behind every great enterprise and every immortal virtue and principle – Samkhya, Yoga, the Truth in its absolute and relative forms, light and brilliance, beauty, fame, honour, and restraint.

All the great virtues, like serenity, detachment, and the rest, are founded in me. I am the transcendent One, beyond the gunas of Prakriti. I am the Atman in everything and I depend on none. I am the dearest, most loving friend that exists – the truest wellwisher."

Thus, as the Swan, Uddhava, I answered the deep questions of Sanaka and his brother Rishis. They sang my praises with mighty hymns; they worshipped me with ardour. Then I flew back to my realm, as the Rishis and Brahma, their sire, watched me in wonder and with love,' Krishna told Uddhava,"

Suka said.

BHAKTI AS THE SUPREME WAY

SRI SUKA SAID, "UDDHAVA SAID, 'KRISHNA, VEDIC SCHOLARS DESCRIBE so many ways for man to evolve spiritually. Are all these paths equally effective, or is any one of them superior, the greatest way?

Lord, you told me that the bhakti marga, the way of communion with you by renouncing every other attachment and to devote oneself to loving you is a way apart from every other, a path that needs no other beside it. It seems that you consider bhakti as being the best path, better than the rest.'

The Lord replied, 'The Veda was lost during the Pralaya, and when a new Kalpa began I revealed it again to Brahma. The Veda contains the bhakti dharma, which turns the mind directly toward me.

Brahma taught the Veda to his son Svayambhuva, the first Manu. Svayambhuva imparted the Veda to Bhrigu and the Saptarishi.

From these seven, their children – the Devas, Asuras, Guhyakas, Manushyas, Siddhas, Gandharvas, Vidyahdaras, Charanas, Kimdevas, Kinnaras, Nagas, Rakshasas, and Kimpurushas learnt the Veda. These races had different natures, according to the dominance of one or other guna in them: sattva, rajas, and tamas.

Because of their diverse natures, their forms, character and ways of life were widely disparate, as well. Thus, each race interpreted the Veda according to their inherent disposition. The interpretations were as divergent as the races.

Because the different kinds of beings differ, so do their ways of thought. Though they have never studied the Veda themselves, some individuals adhere to ancestral tradition; others follow their wild natures and become atheists.

Noble friend, deluded by my maya, they speak in many ways and tongues about what is the supreme goal, the final beatitude. They do this not from knowing the Truth but from their own past karma and their present natures.

Dharma, fame, pleasure, honesty, self-control, wealth, eating, performing yagnas, performing austerity, giving charity, keeping vows – different men see all of these as being the final good, depending upon their own karmic tendencies.

Every aspiration and effort to gain these will only lead the jiva into realms ruled by karma, all of them ephemeral and finally all yielding suffering. The brief pleasures and joys these bring are hardly untainted themselves with dreadful defects such as envy, vindictiveness, and all sorts of dissatisfactions and imperfections.

Uddhava, but the man who renounces all his desires and surrenders to me, I shine in his heart as his very self. The joy this man feels is something that no creature bound by his senses can ever understand.

The very world wells with perfect joy for the man who has no attachments, whose mind and senses are restrained, who is reposed and even-sighted, who finds his absolute bliss and satisfaction in me.

The real bhakta, who has given himself to me, he does not wish for an emperor's throne, not the sovereignty of magnificent Rasatala, not to become Brahma, not to own all the yogic siddhis; why, my bhakta does not even wish for moksha from the wheel of transmigration.

I say to you not my son Brahma, not Siva who is part of me, not my brother Balarama, not my Devi Lakshmi, why, not my very Atman is as dear to me as my bhaktas!

I follow the footsteps of the Sage who wants nothing, who is always calm, who bears no one any enmity – so that all the worlds I bear within me might be purified by his sacred padadhuli, the dust from his feet.

No one, not seekers after moksha, ever knows the perfect and desireless ecstasy that my bhaktas experience. I am their only wealth, and to me they are deeply attached. They bear love for all beings, and their minds are free of the taint of lust.

Often, when he begins his journey, my bhakta might well be ruled by his senses. Gradually, as his bhakti grows, he vanquishes them.

As the blazing fire makes ashes of its fuel, bhakti for me makes ashes of all sin, and removes every obstacle from the path of the devotee.

Uddhava, not yoga, samkhya, karma, dharma, sannyasa or any tapasya draws me as fervent bhakti does.

With bhakti, holy men, for whom I am their only love and their soul, surely find me. Even the lowest man, of unclean ways, let him become my devotee and he shall be purified and come to me.

No dharma, even if it preach honesty, compassion, knowledge, penance, charity, and the other virtues, can purify a man's heart, unless it has place in it for bhakti toward me.

There is no true bhakti without the melting heart, flowing tears of joy, and the hair standing on end from rapture. Without this complete and intense emotion of surrender, how can any heart be purified?

Who is speechless from joy, whose heart has melted with love, who weeps inconsolably when he is separated from me, who laughs aloud to himself to think of the mysteries of my maya, who sings and dances uninhibitedly to think of my lila and of my divine sport as my Avataras – a bhakta with such love purifies all the worlds!

Gold returns to its pristine brilliance when it is melted down in fire and its impurities removed. So, too, the jiva purified in bhakti attains to me.

Applying kohl made from potent herbs to the eyes makes their vision acute, enabling them to see more sharply. The mind that listens to my holy Purana becomes increasingly able to grasp the subtlest truth that is the Atman.

The mind that dwells on the objects of the senses grows increasingly attached to them; the mind that thinks constantly of me dissolves into me.

Fix your thought upon me, purify your heart with bhakti, abandon every other thought, for all of those are illusions, mere dreams.

Renounce objects that excite sexual passion and also companions that indulge in them. Sit in a calm, pleasing and secluded place, and meditate upon me tirelessly. Nothing ruins a man spiritually as much as associating with loose women and becoming addicted to gratifying the sexual urge.'

Uddhava said, 'Lotus-eyed Lord, tell me how a seeker meditates upon you. In what form should he conceive of you and as having what qualities?'

Krishna said, 'He must sit upon a seat neither high nor low, with his back straight and his hands in his lap. His eyes must be half shut, as if gazing at the tip of his nose. He then purifies the path of the vital breath by pranayama: pooraka, inhaling, kumbhaka, holding the breath, and rechaka, exhaling. He begins by inhaling through the left nostril and exhaling, deliberately, through the right. Later, this order can be reversed. He must restrain his senses.

Like the finest thread in a lotus stalk, an eternal echo of the tolling of a bell, the mystic AUM, Pranava, reaches up from the muladhara chakra. By regulating the prana, you must raise the Omkara into the chakra of the heart and make it clearly manifest there. This pranayama is called sagarbha.

You should practise the pranayama pregnant with Pranava ten times during the three sandhyas: morning, noon, and evening. If you do this for a month, you will gain the required control over your breathing.

Now, the seeker meditates upon the lotus of the heart. So far, it drooped down, as if in dejection, toward its stem. Now you should meditate upon it as blooming upward, with eight vivid petals and a pericarp at its heart.

In that pericarp, meditate upon Surya, Chandra, and Agni, one above the other. In the midst of the Agni, invoke my form, which is a most auspicious one upon which to fix your thought in dhyana.

Visualise me thus – with fine, strong limbs; calm and beautiful; four-armed, each arm long and well-formed; with a handsome throat; radiant cheeks, lit by an enchanting smile; wearing fish-shaped earrings on long-lobed ears; clad in a golden-hued robe; my complexion deep blue like that of a raincloud. Visualise me as being the abode of Sri and Srivatsa.

See me with chakra, sankha, gada, pankaja, and wreathed in a vanamala. See the shimmering anklets above my feet and the splendorous Kaustubha round my neck.

Imagine me with a sparkling crown, with jewelled wristlets, a girdle, armbands, exquisite in each limb, so that your heart is bewitched, and with my eyes radiating peace and infinite joy.

Let the determined seeker withdraw his senses from the world, into his mind. Let the intellect, which controls the mind, absorb it into my form.

Next, the mind chooses a single limb or portion of my form, preferably a part of the smiling face. When your dhyana is thus concentrated, you need no longer imagine the rest of the form.

Having attained this single-mindedness, the mind dwells upon me as the Absolute Being, and no other thought enters it.

He that has thus concentrated his mind will see me, the Paramatman, in the Atman, and no difference between the two – just as a mote of light that is absorbed into a larger and brighter light then exists within it.

The Yogi that practises dhyana soon passes beyond the delusion of the seer, the seen, and the act of seeing as being apart from one another,' said Krishna."

SIDDHIS: OCCULT POWERS

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "THE WORSHIPFUL LORD SAID,

'The Yogi who conquers his senses, controls the vital prana, attains concentration of mind, and fixes it upon me, comes to possess many psychic and occult siddhis.'

Uddhava said, 'Achyuta, which form of dhyana results in which power? How does the Yogi gain these? How many are they? Tell me about them, for you bestow these siddhis upon your bhaktas.'

Krishna replied, 'Those that know about these powers say that there are eighteen different types of siddhis and eighteen different dhyanas for attaining them. Of these, eight come from me, while ten emanate from the dominance of sattva in Prakriti.

Anima, becoming very small or atomising the body, mahima, growing huge, and laghima, becoming weightless, levitating: these three siddhis are of the body.

Uniting the senses with their ruling deities, by which one gains the power to enjoy the sensual experience of any being: this is praapti, attainment; with this siddhi a Yogi can control other beings.

The fifth siddhi is prakamya: the power to enjoy, intuitively, objects upon any world, the Swargas that the Shastras describe, as well as the marvellous Patalas below the Earth.

The sixth siddhi is isitva: the power to direct and control objects in nature and the will of other beings.

Vasitaa, the seventh siddhi, gives a man the power to remain detached while occupying a body and experiencing the world through its senses.

The eighth power, the highest, is kamavasayita. With this, a man can enjoy whatever he wishes for, instantly. Gentle Uddhava, these eight siddhis belong to me, and I bestow them.

The other siddhis are being free from hunger and thirst; being able to see and hear things from great distances; being able to travel at the speed of thought; being able to assume any form one likes; to be able to enter into other bodies; to die only when one wishes; to witness the divine sport of the Devas and other celestials; to get anything one wants; to be able to go anywhere, unobstructed by physical objects.

These are the lesser siddhis, attained by the dominance of sattva.

There are five, still lower, occult powers: trikaalagyana, being able to know the past, the present and the future; being able to stand extremes of heat and cold, and all the opposites of sensuous experience; reading others' minds; being able to withstand and subdue the forces of nature: fire, the sun, water, and poison; being invincibly strong.

These being the siddhis, listen to the different types of dhyana by which each can be gained.

The mind that meditates upon the Bhutasukshma or Tanmatras, the subtle essences of the elements, which I animate, attains to the rarefied conditions of the Mahabhutas. The man that meditates upon these acquires anima and can make his body small as an atom.

The dhyani who fixes his thought upon the Mahatattvas, in which also I dwell, acquires the siddhi of mahima, by which he can grow to a great size. This is achieved by concentrating upon any of the Mahabhutas, with me as its essence and life.

He that meditates upon me as a paramanu, the subtlest particle of an atom, of any of the elements, attains the lightness of that particle, in space, and in time.

Meditating upon me with the sattvika aspect of his ahamkara, the Yogi will acquire the siddhi called prapti. With this, he can identify himself with any creature, and control them at will.

He that fixes his dhyana upon me as the Sutratman, the pervasive Spirit, the vital force that moves all things, acquires Prakamya, by which he can experience and enjoy the farthest realms of Swarga, Bhumi and Patala.

He that meditates upon me as Vishnu, master of the gunas, manifest as Kaala, gains the siddhi Isitva, by which he can control and direct the body and spirit of any being.

He that meditates upon me as Narayana, called Bhagavan, which means He that owns the six divine majesties, and also Turiya, the Fourth One, who is beyond Virat, Hiranyagarbha and Karana, the Primal Cause, that Yogi gains the siddhi Vasitaa. He becomes like me, perfectly imperturbable.

The seeker who fixes his mind upon the Nirguna Brahman attains Paramananda, which is supreme and eternal bliss, verily the fulfilment of all desires.

The Yogi that thinks of me as Aniruddha, Lord of Swetadwipa, the White Continent, who is taintless and who is the quintessence of purity, attains to taintless purity himself, and becomes free from sorrow, delusion, and the six other evils of samsara.

He that meditates upon me as prana, the vital force, which covers all things even as akasa does, he is able to hear every sound that vibrates the cosmic ether, regardless of how far away he is from the source of the sound.

He that meditates upon me while gazing at the sun, develops the siddhi called Dura Darshana Drishti, with which he acquires subtle vision that enables him to see objects at great distances, however small.

He who sits in dhyana of me, offering his body, mind and prana, is able to travel anywhere by his very will, upon his thought: the siddhi of Mano Java.

Meditating upon me, the universal cause, and impressing my form upon his mind, uniting with me, the Yogi can assume any form he chooses, for I am all forms and of inconceivable power.

The siddhi known as Parakayapravesha is used to enter into another body. The Siddha who has this occult power first concentrates upon entering the body he wishes to enter. He imagines himself occupying the other body. Then his linga sarira, his spirit form, leaves its old body, merges with akasa, and enters the other body as prana, through the nostrils. Even as a six-legged bee does from flower to flower, the Siddha can fly from body to body.

The Yogi sets his anal chakra over his heel, and stimulates it. He raises the linga sarira, the spirit body, an adjunct of the Atman, first to his heart, then higher up his chest, from chakra to chakra, to his neck and finally to the crown of his head. The subtle body then passes out of the material one through the Brahmarandhra the spiritual aperture at the crown. The sthula sarira is abandoned and the seeker attains union with the Brahman.

Yogis who wish to sport in the enchanted gardens of the Devas should meditate upon the suddhasattva, the pure divine essence. Apsaras will fly down to him in heavenly vimanas and attend to his every pleasure.

When a bhakta who depends upon me, who has surrendered to me, wishes for anything at all, his wish is fulfilled instantaneously.

He that is absorbed in me will not find obstacles anywhere. I am the master of all things and the Free One, and my bhaktas' resolves and commands shall be accomplished as mine.

The seeker whose nature has become purified by bhakti, who is a master of dhyana, becomes a trikaalagyani: he knows the three times, past, present, and future, and everything they contain, including his own numerous births and deaths in different bodies and species.

The body of a tapasvin that is suffused with Yoga, which is communion, cannot be burned by fire: just as a fish is not endangered by water!

He that meditates upon my Avataras, my weapons and emblems – the Srivatsa, the Sudarshana Chakra, the Panchajanya, my banner of Garuda, my chowries, my white parasol, and the rest – shall be invincible. He will not meet with defeat anywhere, at any time.

And so shall Yogis that meditate upon me by these disciples attain to the specific occult siddhi associated with each form of dhyana.

Indeed, for the Yogi who has stilled his senses and his mind, who has mastered his breath, his prana, and who knows how to fix his thought upon my form – no siddhi is unattainable for him.

However, the greatest men all agree that the siddhis are finally impediments in the path of the seeker. They delay the evolution of the highest Yoga of my bhaktas whose final aim is to attain to me. The occult powers occupy the mind and, in their way, cause the spirit to stagnate.

Birth – as birds and the gods are born to able to fly – herbs, penance, the chanting of mantras can all confer siddhis. Every siddhi that these can give can also be acquired by the practice of Yoga. However, the reverse is not true: moksha, which can be had by Yoga, cannot be obtained by the other paths.

I am the source of all these supernatural powers, and I control them. I am the master of the paths of Yoga, union with the Godhead, of Samkhya, the way of knowledge that leads to liberation, of Dharma, the path of righteousness laid down in the Veda, and also of the Brahmavadis, the Vedic teachers.

I am the Indweller, the Atman in every being, infinite and eternal. I am the transcendent One. Even as the elements are both within and outside everything that emerges from the Panchamahabhutas, so, too, I pervade and transcend all the living, and this universe,' said Krishna to Uddhava."

MANIFESTATIONS OF GLORY

SRI SUKA SAID, "UDDHAVA SAID,

'You are truly the Parabrahman, without beginning or end, and limitless. Maya does not affect you. You create, preserve, and destroy every being in time.

Those that know the Veda see and adore you in all things high and low. But men whose hearts are not pure, whose minds are immature, cannot see this truth.

Krishna, tell me about the various forms and aspects of yourself that the Rishis worship, and then find perfection.

Lord, you dwell in every being, move in them all, move their hearts and bodies, secret and hidden. But deluded by you, they do not see you, who are the witness of all things, great and small.

O, you that are replete with every divine glory, tell all your manifestations in Swarga, Bhumi and Rasatala, which are foremost, in which your power particularly abides. I prostrate at your holy feet, the abode of everything that is sacrosanct!'

Krishna said, 'Uddhava, you ask clever questions! Arjuna asked me the same thing between the two armies, upon the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where he waited in his chariot to face his enemies in war.

Panic gripped the Pandava, because he thought it was a grievous sin to kill one's own relatives for the sake of a kingdom. He laid down his bow and said he would not fight. He, too, allowed the common delusion to rule him – that he was the killer, while someone else would be killed.

I calmed him down by reasoning with him, speaking to him about the Atman and its immortality. When his hands no longer shook and his hair did not stand on end from fright, that tigerish kshatriya asked me this same question that you have. I will answer it exactly as I did for him.

Uddhava, I am the Atman, the friend and the master of all beings. Indeed, I am all beings, and I am their creator, protector and destroyer, too.

I move the mobile; I am Kaala among the forces of control. Among gunas I am sattva, and the virtue in the virtuous.

Among creations of Prakriti, I am the Sutratman: the spirit that runs like a subtle thread through all things. Of great things, I am Mahatattva, the primeval source from which all corporeal things have evolved. Of subtle beings I am the jiva, and of invincible ones I am mind.

Among those that propagate the Veda, I am Brahma; of mantras I am Pranava, which includes in itself the three sounds *a*, *u*, and *m*: *AUM*. Among letters I am *a*, the first, among Vedic metres I am the Gayatri.

Of Devas, I am Indra; of the eight Vasus I am Agni, who brings the havis from yagnas to the Gods. Of Adityas, I am Vishnu; among Rudras I am Nilalohita, the One with the blue throat.

Of Brahmarishis, I am Bhrigu; of Rajarishis, Manu. Among Devarishis, I am Narada; Kamadhenu among cows.

Of the greatest Siddha masters, I am Kapila; of birds I am Garuda. Of the Prajapatis, I am Daksha, and Aryaman among the Pitrs.

Uddhava, among Daityas I am Prahlada; of the stars and planets, Soma, their lord. Of Rakshasas and Yakshas, I am Kubera, their sovereign.

Among elephants, I am Airavata; of water beings Varuna, their king. Among blazing bodies, I am Surya, and of men, I am the king.

Of horses, I am Ucchaisravas, gold among metals; of the dispensers of justice I am Yama, and Vasuki among serpents.

Of the great Nagas, I am Ananta; of wild beasts, I am the lion. Of the Varnasramas, I am Sannyasa, and the Brahmana among the Varnas.

Of holy rivers I am Ganga; the ocean among pools and lakes. Of weapons, I am the bow, and among bowmen I am Parameshwara, who burned the Tripura.

Of places to dwell, I am Meru, of places difficult of access I am Himalaya. Of trees, I am the aswattha, and barley of grains.

Of priests, I am Vasistha, and Brihaspati among those that know the true meaning of the Vedas. Of generals, I am Skanda, and among those that reveal dharma to men I am Brahma.

Of sacrifices, I am japa and Brahmayagna, and ahimsa among all the vratas. Of the agents of purification, I am air, fire, sun, water and vaak, the words of holy men.

Among the ways of communion, I am samadhi, the careful strategy in those that aspire to victory. Of mental deliberations, I am the discernment that distinguishes spirit from matter, Atman from anatman. I am the persisting uncertainty in the theories of all philosophers.

Of women, I am Satarupa, among men, her husband Svayambhuva Manu. Of Munis, I am Narayana, and Sanatkumara among brahmacharis.

Among the ways of virtue I am Sannyasa, of the means to happiness I am the ability to turn the mind inward. Of the ways to keep secrets, I am silence, as well as sweet and careful speech. Among couples, I am Brahma, who was the first to be both man and woman.

Of the vigilant and sleepless ones, I am the year; of seasons, I am the spring. Of months I am margasirsha, and abhijit among constellations.

Of yugas, I am Krita Yuga; of the wise and the steadfast, I am Asita and Devala. Of Pauranikas and translators, I am Dwaipayana, who retold the Veda. Of visionaries, I am the Rishi Shukra.

Of those that are called Bhagavan, I am Vaasudeva, and of Bhagavatas, why, Uddhava, I am you! Of Kimpurushas, I am Hanuman, and Sudarshana among Vidyadharas.

Of gemstones, I am the padmaraga, the ruby; of the beautiful creations in nature I am the lotus. Of grasses, I am kusa; of offerings at a yagna, I am the ghee from a sacred cow.

I am the wealth of the industrious; of the gambler, I am the swift deceit. I am the fortitude of the forbearing, and the power of the powerful.

I am the energy and the stamina in the strong; I am the holy ritual that pious men perform. I am He of Nine Forms that the Vaishnavas worship – as Vaasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Narayana, Hayagriva, Varaha, Narasimha, and Vamana.

Of Gandharvas, I am Viswavasu, and Purvachitti among Apsaras. Of mountains I am their firmness, and of the Earth its subtle fragrance.

I am the sweetness in water; of those that give heat I am Agni. I am the light of the sun, the moon and the stars, and of the akasa I am the eternal transcendent sruti.

Of those that revere Sages, I am Bali; of kshatriyas I am Arjuna. And, Uddhava, I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things that ever exist.

I am the function in the five organs of action in the body: of walking, speech, excreting, holding and sexual intercourse. I am also the five senses of touch, sight, taste, hearing, and smell. In all the senses, I am the single Sense.

I am the tanmatras of the Panchamahabhutas – earth, water, air, sky, and fire. I am Ahamkara, and Mahatattva: the five gross elements and the eleven indriyas.

I am the jiva, the Avyakta, pristine and unmanifest Prakriti. I am the three gunas and the Supreme Being. All these, their understanding, and the determination of their true nature, I am. I am the One Being that includes and pervades everything that exists. I am Ishwara and Jiva, and there is nothing without me or apart from me.

Over a great length of time, you might possibly count all the atoms in the universe. But not even I can name for you all my powers and glories. From these, numberless universes are forever being born; what limits are there to Me?

Where you see something special, or someone exceptional, know for certain that I am there. Any extraordinary manifestation of power, prosperity, success, fame, lordliness, modesty, renunciation, attractiveness, luck, courage, endurance, knowledge: all these are mine and flow from me.

These are in brief my special mysteries. Yet, they are merely conceptions to help man turn his mind in dhyana and bhakti toward God. That is their true purpose and you must not attach any other importance to them.

Control your speech, restrain your mind, master prana, and let the higher self rule the lower. If you achieve this, you will no longer be entangled in samsara but become free.

The Sannyasin that keeps grave vows, performs intense austerity, and gives generous charity, as well: if he does not restrain his speech and his mind, all his punya will leak away from him, even as water does from an unfired pot.

So, he that has surrendered to me should control his speech, his mind, and his vital breath, with his heart and understanding immersed in bhakti. He will find life's final fulfilment; he will attain moksha,' said Krishna."

VARNASRAMA: THE BRAHMACHARIN AND THE GRIHASTA

SRI SUKA SAID, "UDDHAVA SAID,

'In the eldest days, you taught the performance of swadharma – for those of the four varnas and the four asramas of life, and others, too – and how, by performing the dharma to which they were born, men could attain to bhakti and your grace. Lotus-eyed Krishna, tell me now how swadharma creates bhakti in the heart.

It is indeed true that, when you appeared to Brahma and the Rishis as the Hamsa, you revealed the way of swadharma, the way to liberation. But, Lord of all, the passage of ages has dimmed your teaching in the minds of men.

Achyuta, even in Brahma's very sabha, where all the arts and sciences abide, personified, to elucidate their teachings, you are the only one that is finally competent to expound, practise, and protect the Sanatana Dharma.

Ah precious Madhusudana, when your godly lila as this Avatara comes to its end and you leave this world, who will keep dharma alive in the dark times to come, when it falls into disuse? Who will revive it when men have forgotten what dharma is?

So, O ultimate and only Knower of dharma in all its aspects, tell me about the dharma that engenders bhakti. So men shall know in the age to come how to live in swadharma, and deepen their faith and devotion.'

Upon being implored by Uddhava, his bhakta, Sri Krishna expounded the dharma, in joy, for the sake of all humankind.

Krishna said, 'The question you have asked shall be as a lamp to men of the future, who follow varnasrama dharma, and also to all righteous men – for it shall help them evolve spiritually.

When the Kalpa began, in the very first krita yuga, there was only a single varna. It was known as Hamsa. That age was called krita yuga because every being that lived then was a Kritaakritya – realised and contented, absorbed in the Atman.

In that first of all yugas, the Veda was manifest as just Pranava, the sacred syllable ***AUM***. I was manifest as dharma, ubiquitous and pervasive, all its four aspects complete and alive. The bhaktas of that yuga were immaculate, sinless, and dhyana was their form of worship.

The treta yuga saw the triune Veda, the Rig, Sama and Yajus, emerge from my heart, and prana was its medium; it came through my breath, Uddhava. I appeared as the Yagna, and its three divisions of Hotr, Udgatr, and Adhvaryu.

From the mouth, hands, thighs and feet of the Virat Purusha, my Cosmic Form, the four varnas were born: the brahmana, the kshatriya, the vasiya, and the sudra. Each came with their inherent dharma to live by, suited to the nature of each.

The four asramas also emerged from my person: the grihasta from my loins, the brahmacharins from my heart, the vanaprasthas from my chest and the Sannyasins from the crown of my head.

The nature of those born in each varna is determined by the part of my body from which they emerged. Thus, those born from the higher parts have nobler, purer natures, while those that came from the lower parts have baser natures.

The brahmanas are self-restrained, having control over their minds and senses. They are pure outwardly and internally, contemplative, contented, forbearing, honest, devoted to me, kindly and truthful.

The kshatriyas are impressive, strong, self-controlled, brave, possessed of endurance, generous, enterprising, firm, revere Sages and all holy men, and command power.

The inherent traits of the vaisya are faith in God, belief in the Veda, charitableness, humility; he serves holy men, and has an insatiable acquisitiveness.

The sudra is a faithful servant to the other varnas, to the Devas, to Rishis, a keeper and server of kine. He is satisfied with whatever he is given for his services.

Those born outside the four varnas, who do not live by the dharma of the asramas are unclean, duplicitous, dishonest, thieving, with no belief in God or the Veda, wanton, needlessly quarrelsome, lustful, prone to rage and greed.

The four varnas share common dharma: never to be cruel, dishonest, thieving, lustful, angry or greedy. They do everything they can to be pleasing to all their fellow creatures.

Brahmacharins are of two kinds, upakurvanas and naishthikas. The dharma of the upakurvanas, of a dvija from the first three varnas, is to be initiated by the rituals of purification both before and after their birth.

He becomes twice-born at the ceremony called upanayanam, when he is invested with the sacred thread that makes him ready for study of the Veda and the other Shastras and rituals. The brahmacharin then lives in the house of his Guru: a life of rigorous discipline, studying the Veda intensively, whenever his preceptor calls him to a lesson.

He wears deerskin, a girdle of grass and the sacred thread, his hair in jata, keeps a danda in his hand, a rosary for japa, a kamandalu and some kusa grass. He pays no heed to his physical appearance, the clothes he wears, fashion or comfort.

He keeps mowna, silence, when bathing, eating, excreting, during yagnas, and while doing japa in his mind. He does not clip his nails, shave his hair, on his head, in his armpits, or his pubis.

The brahmacharin never consciously brings himself to a sexual ejaculation. If this happens during sleep or while he is awake, he bathes, performs pranayama, and chants the Gayatri mantra.

Keeping his mind and body pure, with great care and devotion, he serves and worships Agni, Surya, his Guru, the Cow, Rishis, his elders, older people, the Devas and all those worthy of worship. At sunrise and sunset, he sits in stillness and repeats the Gayatri mantra.

He looks upon his Acharya as being me, and not as just a man. He never insults his Guru or disobeys him. For, truly, the Guru is the embodiment of all the Gods.

Morning and evening, the brahmcharin goes out for bhiksha, to beg alms. He brings whatever he has gathered to his Guru and offers it to the master. He restrains his instinct to eat and has only what his master gives him, allows him.

He serves his Guru like a slave. He goes behind him wherever he goes, sleeps at his feet, washing and pressing his preceptor's feet when his Guru is resting. He stands with his folded hands next to where his master sits.

Until his tutelage is complete, he lives thus in his master's house, in the most austere manner, strictly keeping his vows, most of all the vow of celibacy.

If the brahmacharin aspires to Brahmaloka, he remains celibate all his life, dedicates himself to his Guru, and spends all his years studying the Veda. The lifelong brahmacharin is called a naishthika.

The naishthika, his spiritual light augmented by his study of Vedic secrets, should meditate upon me as manifest in the Vedic fire, in his Acharya, in himself, in all beings, with no sense of duality.

Other than the grihasta, the followers of the other asramas must shun sexually prompted dealings with women – looking at them with desire, touching them, speaking intimately or joking with them. They should turn away from the sight of birds and animals copulating.

As the members of the other asramas do, the naishthika must follow the universal disciplines. He must practise cleanliness, achamana the ritual cleansing of the mouth, have the daily bath, perform sandhya vandana, be straightforward, go to the sacred tirthas and shrines, do japa, avoid unclean food, contacts and associations. He must make it his habit to sense my presence everywhere, in everyone, and control his senses, his mind, his speech, and his actions.

A naishthika brahmacharin who follows this fervidly austere way of life shines forth like agni, and indeed his mind, with all its innate tendencies, shall be burnt pure in the fire of gyana. He shall find profound bhakti toward me.

When his Vedic study is complete, the brahmacharin that wishes to become a grihasta gives dakshina to his Guru, and with the master's blessing, takes the samaavartana, the ritual ablution that marks the end of his brahmacharya.

Now he can become a grihasta or a vanaprastha, a hermit that dwells in a forest, depending on whether he wants to enjoy the pleasures of the world or if he wants to purify his mind further. However, if he is the loftiest kind of seeker, the most evolved type, he can directly take Sannyasa. For, if an aspirant is ready and able, he can pass straight to the highest asrama from a lower one. But never should any bhakta of mine come down from a higher asrama to a lower one, nor live a life that does not adopt one of the four asramas and its mores.

He that enters grihastasrama must marry a girl younger than himself, blemishless in lineage, auspiciousness, tradition, and suitable for him in every way. She should belong to the same varna as himself, and if need be, from a lower varna.

Performing yagnas, chanting and learning the Veda, and giving dana, charity, is the swadharma of all dvijas. But only the brahmana may receive charity, teach the Veda and officiate at yagnas.

If a brahmana considers living by alms harmful to his austerity, reputation, or his spiritual evolution, he can make his living by the other two means. If he finds even these less than austere, he may eat by foraging for leftover or fallen grains from the fields.

The body of a brahmana is not created to enjoy coarse worldly pleasures, but for a life of hardship and penance in this world and eternal bliss in the hereafter.

The grihasta who lives on grain that he collects from fields and bazaars, who has relinquished desire and attachment, and made me his sole refuge, will find mukti while leading the life of a family man.

Anyone that helps such a devout man dedicated to me, I shall watch over him and save him from his troubles and be as a ship to him upon a stormy sea.

A kshatriya king must protect his people from every danger as a father does his children, as the king elephant does his herd.

Such a king will make ashes of all his sins in this life, and live with Indra in the next in a mansion that shines like the sun and enjoy every delight that Swarga has to offer.

If a brahmana finds himself in such dire straits that his life is threatened, he may resort to trading – the vaisya's swadharma – until his tribulations pass. If he cannot subsist by this, he may even take up arms, like a kshatriya, and live by them. But he must never become as a dog, serving mean masters.

A kshatriya, too, in deep trouble, can trade as a vaisya does, or live by hunting. He can even earn his living by teaching as a brahmana does. But he may never resort to service, the sudra's way, and live serving a mean master.

If a vaisya finds himself in trouble he can become a servant and live a sudra's life. If a sudra is in need, he can take to carpentry or mat-weaving. But all these must return to their own dharma once their time of trouble is past.

The grihasta conceives of me dwelling in the Devas, Rishis, Pitrs, all men and lower creatures, too, and worships these, respectively, daily, with homas, Vedic study, sraddhas, formal poor-feeding and offerings of food to animals. This is the Panchamahayagna, which the grihasta must perform daily.

Using one's wealth, earned, inherited, or acquired by some windfall, a grihasta should undertake other yagnas, too, as long as he does not oppress, deprive or humiliate his family or his servants for that sake.

While having a family, the grihasta must be careful not to become overly attached to his wife or blood. He must always be vigilant to the true nature of life. He must remember that pleasures of this life are as fleeting as those of Devaloka.

Being together with wives, children, friends and relatives is no more than the brief association of the members of a caravanserai. As a man's relatives change in dreams, from sleep to sleep, so too do the members of his family, from life to life. These recur as well in many forms.

He that understands this truth lives in his home like a guest, with no feeling of possessiveness to any object or person.

The grihasta that is truly my bhakta can continue to live in his home until his end, and continue to perform all the duties of the householder, in a spirit of detachment. Otherwise, he can retire to the forest and become a vanaprastha. Else, he can entrust his responsibilities to his eldest son and roam the world as a Sannayasi: a holy wanderer without any fixed abode.

The grihasta who is too attached to his home, constantly anxious about his children, his wealth and luxuries – he is pitiable, for his mind is petty and he is a gross and ignorant being, far indeed from the spiritual life. He is shackled with the chain of ahamkara, the powerful sense of *I* and *mine*.

He is prey to every anxiety: "Ah, if I die my parents, my wife and children will be grief-stricken. How will they manage without me, who will support them?"

Caught in the trap that is his home, the ignorant man dwells on the pleasures and experiences of family life, over and over, until death comes for him. What awaits him is devolution and dark births in lower species, deeper bondage and blindness,' said Krishna to Uddhava."

VARNASRAMA: VANAPRASTHA AND SANNYASA

SUKA DEVA CONTINUED, "KRISHNA WENT ON,

'He that wants to be a vanaprastha spends the third portion of his life, from the age of fifty to seventy-five in an asrama in the jungle. He either takes his wife with him, or leaves her in the care of his son.

The vanaprastha lives by eating roots, tubers and fruit that are allowed him. He wears valkala, or clothes made of grass or a deerskin.

He ignores his appearance, disregarding his body; his hair and nails grow long, matted, and wild. He barely keeps his teeth clean, but he bathes thrice each day, at every sandhya, and sleeps on the ground or the floor of his kutila.

In summer, he performs panchagni sadhana; he sits amid five fires in dhyana – four that he lights around himself and the fifth the sun above. During the monsoon, he keeps the vow of abhraavakaasa, sitting bared to the torrents of the sky. In winter, his austerity is udakavaasa: sitting neck-deep in icy water to meditate. The vanaprastha's life is austere indeed.

He may eat what he cooks on a fire, otherwise what time ripens. He can consume grain and cereal pounded by a mortar or between stones, or just chewed by the mortar of his teeth.

A vanaprastha forages in the forest for his food. As far as circumstances and his environs allow, he must not store food that he collects to eat later, nor gather food from elsewhere.

He performs seasonal sacrifices such as the Aagrayaana, which is part of his dharma, with offerings of charu and purodasa that he makes from wild cereals. No vanaprastha performs any Vedic yagna that involves animal sacrifice.

Knowers of the Veda agree the forest-dwelling hermit performs agnihotra, darsha, poornamaasa, and chaaturmaasya as he did before, except now using only such ingredients that are available to him in the jungle.

I am the embodiment of tapasya. The vanaprastha worships me with unimaginably severe penance. He becomes so emaciated during these, that the outlines of all his veins and arteries are revealed. Gradually, stage by stage, he ascends to me, passing through Maharloka and other exalted realms on his way. This is called krama mukti, salvation by stages.

None is as foolish as the man who uses tapasya, the noblest and most rigorous discipline, which can bestow moksha upon him, to attain paltry mundane possessions or satisfy the desires of his mind and senses.

When the jungle ascetic becomes so enfeebled by his austerities that he cannot perform them anymore, his swadharma, he uses dhyana to withdraw the sacred fires he has lit and tended into his heart. Now he focuses all his thought just upon me, and, building a goodly pyre, immolates himself in it.

When an ascetic realises that every realm or world that can be acquired through karma is finally and essentially hellish, as is every pleasure and experience in these, he has evolved so he can relinquish his fire ritual, the agnihotra. He has the dispassion now to become a wandering Sannyasin.

He can now worship me with the praajaapatya yagna, as set down in the Shastras. He gives away all that he owns to the priests who help him perform this sacrifice, withdraws the three sacred fires into himself, and enters the asrama known as Sannyasa, with no desires or support.

At first, the Devas will set obstacles in the path of such a seeker: as his wife and children, to keep him from becoming a Sannyasin and moving beyond their realms of influence when he attains the Brahman.

A Sannyasin wears only a kaupina, a triangle of cloth to cover his private parts. If he wears any more, it is only a loincloth. He carries a staff, a danda, to show that he is a Sannyasi and a waterpot made of gourd. Unless he is in grave danger, he keeps nothing else with him as he ranges the world.

Before he sets foot on the ground or takes a step forward, he scans the earth carefully so that he does not trample any living creature. He drinks water only after straining it through a fine cloth, also for the same reason. He speaks only after he is convinced that what he says is true, and thus sacred. Whatever he does, he must do only with a clear conscience.

Uddhava, just because a man carries a three-pronged staff of bamboo he does not become a tridandi Sannyasi. He needs to have the three dandas of silence, control over his breath, and desirelessness: the restraint of speech, body, and mind.

The wandering Sannyasi must not take bhiksha from the homes of the evil. Otherwise, he can receive alms from the houses of any of the four varnas. But he goes to just seven houses, with no pre-meditation, and is satisfied with whatever he gets from these.

He takes the alms to a lake, river or tank outside the town or village. He sips water in silence, performing achamana, sanctifies the food with prokshana, sprinkling a few drops of water, charged with twelve *AUMs*, Pranavas. He divides the food into four portions – for Brahma, Vishnu, Surya Deva, and all living creatures. The portion for Vishnu he immerses in the water, that for living creatures he leaves upon the ground. Now he can eat what remains of the now sacred food. He does not keep anything to eat later.

His senses and mind restrained, perfectly detached, he wanders the world alone, his sole entertainment and bliss that of his Atman. Absorbed in his soul, he looks upon everything equally, as part of himself.

He rests in secluded, safe places, and with his mind purified by bhakti for me, he loses himself in dhyana upon the oneness of the pervasive Atman and its unity with me.

He uses his spiritual insight to investigate the nature of samsara and moksha, bondage and liberation. He sees that bondage is indulging the senses, allowing them free outward rein toward their objects, while mukti is their subjugation and restraint.

Thus, with his six enemies – lust, anger, greed, and the others: the five senses and the mind – subdued, the Sannyasin continues on his pilgrimage across the Earth, immersed in the eternal ecstasy of the Atman. Thinking of me, renouncing the paltry pleasures of the senses, he ranges on, plunged in the vast and fathomless bliss of his soul.

He roams the free Earth, replete with tirthas, sacred rivers, holy mountains and jungles, hermitages. He wanders into cities, villages, cowherd camps and caravanserais, these latter to beg alms.

He often visits the asramas of vanaprasthas for bhiksha. For, being gleaned from fields freshly, the food he receives from the forest hermits is pure and purifying; and by subsisting on such food, his mind quickly rises out of its delusions, and he evolves spiritually.

The Sannyasin does not see the world experienced by the senses or anything in it as being permanent. He renounces this world and the next, severing any attachments that linger in his heart. He makes no effort to gain anything in them.

He reasons – upon the evidence of dreams – that the world and his own body are illusions: maya projected onto the Atman, and unreal. He remains plunged in the Soul, not even aware of the world or his body, with no memory of them.

My bhakta, who is established in the Atman and who craves nothing not even moksha – he can abjure the dharma of his asrama, and all that the Shastras command. Of course, he must be pure and bathe, but he is not subject to the laws by which the scriptures tell other men to live. He abandons the external symbols of his asrama, like his danda and waterpot, his rituals, and goes about as a Paramahamsa.

Full of the most profound wisdom, he goes about like a child, unmindful of status or hierarchy. Though highly intelligent and skilful, he behaves like a fool. Though deeply learned, he acts like a mad man or a drunkard.

Though a master of the Veda, he deports himself like an animal, entirely unconcerned about manners and accepted conduct and behaviour.

A Sannyasin does not involve himself with academic discussions on the Veda, the scholastic subtleties of interpretation, regardless of whether they are about ritual sacrifices or conduct. He is neither an unbeliever, not a vain hair-splitter or disputant. He takes no part in futile arguments.

Being wise and full of fortitude, he has no fear of the people, just as they have nothing to fear from him. He brooks harsh words and criticism patiently, and is never insulting to anyone. For the sake of his body, or its clamours, he does not create enemies, as animals do.

He knows the same Supreme Soul dwells in all creatures, rather as the same moon is reflected in many bodies of water. As for bodies: all creatures emerged from the same source, the same fundamental matter, and are one in essence.

The Sannyasin is indifferent to the alms he receives, feeling no joy when he gets food or regret when he does not. He knows all this is determined by prarabdha, past karma.

Yet, it is just that he makes some effort to feed himself; for, a healthy body enables one to meditate upon the nature of reality, Truth, and that dhyana leads to realisation of the Soul, and mukti from samsara.

The Sannyasin eats food that comes to him by chance, be it tasty or not. So, too, he accepts whatever else comes to him by fate, good and bad, even-mindedly: the bed he finds to sleep on, the cloth he finds to wear.

The realised Sannyasin does not follow the injunctions of the Shastras in matters of bathing or keeping himself clean. He does these in a spirit of sport, freely, out of choice, even as I do everything in lila, divine play.

He has no consciousness of duality; that was erased when he found me. The residues of it evidenced in eating and the rest will last only as long as his body. When the Sannyasin's body dies, he comes to me, becomes one with me, and is not born again.

A man might know that the final fruit of all desire is only misery. Knowing this, he might well have developed a spirit of renunciation toward a worldly life. He might be a jitendriya, a master of his senses. Yet, he could be ignorant of the highest dharma that leads to me. Such a man should seek out a Guru, who is a Muni and a tapasvin, absorbed in meditating upon the Atman.

Until the disciple attains Self-realisation, he must serve his Guru with perfect devotion, with never an evil thought against him, and looking upon his master as being Me.

He that has not conquered the six enemies – the senses and the mind, whose buddhi is ruled by deep and hidden desires, who has no true illumination, neither renunciation, yet assumes the role of a tridanda Sannyasin and makes a living thus, is a traitor to Dharma.

He deceives the Gods, himself, and Me, the Antaryamin, who dwells in every being, including him. With all the evil and darkness dormant in his heart and waiting to break loose, and his sins far from consumed, such a man loses both this world and the next.

The main dharma of the Sannyasin is to be tranquil and live universal love. The essential dharma of the vanaprastha is austerity and the inner quest for Truth. The grihasta serves everyone and performs yagnas. The brahmacharin serves his Guru.

As best he can, the grihasta also practises continence, austerity, avoids passion, is contented and friendly toward all beings. He has sexual intercourse with his wife at the prescribed time: this is brahmacharya for the householder. All four asramas worship God; that is the common and universal dharma.

He that adores me by performing his swadharma, with his mind fixed upon me and thinking of me as being present in all creatures, will certainly come to bhakti very soon.

Dear Uddhava, with that immaculate and constant devotion, he will quickly attain to me. And I am Brahman, Lord of all the worlds, the one that reveals the Veda, and the origin, the support, and the end of all beings.

He that has found purity of mind by keeping his swadharma, who has found the Truth by the direct experience of my being, who has understood the omnipotence of my power and the infinity of my being, will come swiftly to me and find mukti.

Merely observing swadharma leads a man to the realm of the Pitrs, the manes. But if a man dedicates his life of swadharma to me in bhakti, it becomes a means to moksha.

This is the answer to your question about how a bhakta who keeps swadharma, based upon worship of me, attains the Parabrahman, which I am,' said Krishna."

THE SPIRITUAL GOAL, EXHAUSTIVELY

SRI SUKA SAID, "SRI BHAGAVAN SAID,

'The man for whom spiritual life and entities have become a matter of experience rather than intellectual debate, whose knowledge of the scriptures has led him to realisation of the Atman, he knows that all the world is mere maya. He abandons that world in me; he renounces any gyana that is not the ultimate gyana. This is vidvat Sannyasa, the renunciation of enlightenment.

For the Sage who has experienced the Spirit, I am the final goal, as well as the means toward it. For him, I am Swarga and Moksha. He loves nothing apart from me.

Those that have wisdom and experience come to my transcendent Being. Such knowing ones are dearest to me and I love them above all else. By gyana, they enshrine me in their hearts forever.

Not tapasya, japa, dana, visiting sacred places, bathing at holy tirthas, or any of the other spiritual disciplines commended in the scriptures confers what even a single ray of true gyana, enlightenment, does.

Uddhava, know that you are spirit, find vigyana – the ecstasy of union with Godhead, of the union of Atman and Paramatman – and owning this illumination, worship me fervently.

It is told that Munis that adored me of old, in their hearts, with gyana and vigyana, found perfection of the Spirit. They were absorbed in me.

Birth, life and death are caused by fate, the elements, and living beings themselves; these are nothing but maya, illusion. The world of maya does not exist in the Beginning or at the End; it appears briefly in between, rather as the delusion of a rope being a snake does not exist before it enters the mind and once it is discovered to be illusory it ceases to be. Birth, growth, change, decay and death affect your body, but they do not affect your soul. Even when the rope is briefly misunderstood to be a snake, it continues to be a rope. So, too, you, the Atman, remain unaffected by the six stages through which the body passes.'

Uddhava said, 'Lord of everything, who have the universe for your body, I beg you, tell me in detail about the ancient path of gyana, pristine and immaculate, which is founded upon renunciation and intuition. Dispel my ignorance, Krishna. Also, O Embodiment of the cosmos, tell me about the way of bhakti, the bhakti yoga that even Brahma and the Devas eagerly seek.

My Lord, your ambrosiac feet are the only refuge for men that walk the searing path of samsara, tormented by the threefold tortures of body, mind and fate. They are the only sacred parasol under which we find shade, while in your great mercy you shower the amrita of the spirit over us.

I have fallen into the abyss of samsara and been stung by the serpent death. I thirst ceaselessly after the basest, most trifling sensual pleasures. Great One, raise me up from this pit with your words like nectar; raise me from hell into moksha.'

Sri Bhagavan said, 'Yudhishtira Ajatashatru, who had no enemy, asked his Pitama Bheeshma, greatest among all the knowers of dharma, the same question while we all listened.

When the Mahabharata yuddha was over, Yudhishtira was dejected past enduring by the carnage and especially by the slaughter of his kin. He sought to assuage his grief by discussing various aspects of dharma with Bheeshma, who lay upon a bed of arrows on Kurukshetra. Finally, Yudhishtira asked Bheeshma about the ways of dharma that lead a man out of samsara to liberation.

Let me tell you what I heard then from the lips of Devavrata: his profound exposition on gyana, vairagya, vigyana, sraddha, bhakti, and other spiritual matters.

I consider gyana, knowledge, as being the faculty in all creatures from Brahma down to the ant that perceives the continuum of the twenty-eight causal phenomena. The group of nine: Prakriti, Purusha, Mahatattva, Ahamkara, and the five Tanmatras. The eleven: the five organs of action, the five of knowledge, and the mind. The five: the Panchamahabhuta. The three: the gunas. Further, gyana sees that all these primordial causes and their effects – the embodied creatures and the rest – are all permeated by a single consciousness.

Gyana is the perception of the Atman in all creatures and existence, while vigyana is the vision of the Brahman to the exclusion of the evanescent modes of existence in which Reality embodies itself. The Gyani sees clearly that origin, existence, and dissolution concern only the three gunas and never the transcendent Parabrahman.

Sat, reality, is the same eternally; the rest are a series of effects that end as they began in that original Essence and Truth.

The Veda, direct experience, the traditional wisdom of the Rishis, and inference: these are the four means by which one might realise the truth. All these agree that the plural worlds of multiplicity have no permanence or final reality. The wise man rejects samsara.

The man of discernment knows that, just as the pleasures of karma in this world are ephemeral and finally lead to misery, so, too are those of all the realms upto Brahma's very loka.

I already spoke to you about bhakti yoga, but since you cherished what you heard, and out of my love for you, O sinless Uddhava, let me expound that yoga to you again.

Faith in the amrita Purana that tells my legends, reverence for these tales, the chanting of my names, steadfastness and perseverance in worshipping me, hymning me and giving praise, performing sashtanga namaskara, the eight-limbed prostration to me, serving my bhaktas, and remembering that I am present in all beings: this is the way of bhakti.

Using your body to serve me, devoting your speech to describe my glory, surrendering your mind and heart to me, renouncing every desire for my sake: this is bhakti yoga.

Relinquishing your wealth and pleasures for my sake; performing yagna, dana, japa, vrata and tapa in my name: these are disciplines to develop bhakti.

Uddhava, seekers that practise these disciplines and come to complete surrender find unalloyed devotion: immaculate, motiveless, profound and unshakeable. They have nothing left to achieve; this is their final goal.

When he offers his purified heart to me, the Brahman, in perfect serenity dharma, gyana, vairagya, and aishwarya, divine grace, appear and evolve spontaneously in the seeker.

If the same mind is plunged in samsara, left loose to follow the careen of the senses and pleasure, rajas dominates it. That heart becomes entangled in false, unspiritual values. It moves away from me, away from salvation.

Dharma creates bhakti. Gyana is, of course, the perception of the Atman as being pervasive in the world of samsara. Vairagya is detachment from the world of the senses. Aishwarya involves the development of the occult siddhis like anima, mahima and the rest.'

Uddhava said, 'Varikarshana, destroyer of your enemies, what disciplines are involved in Yama and Niyama? What is Sama, and what, Dama? Lord, what is titiksha, patience, and what is dhriti, firmness? What are dana, tapasya, shaurya, satya and rita? What is tyaga, and which is the wealth that is untainted? What, Krishna, are yagna and dakshina?

Sriman, from where does a man derive his strength? Kesava, what is bhaga, fortune? What is profit? What is the final gyana? What are the highest Hri, bashfulness, and Sri, beauty? What is happiness and what sorrow?

Who is a pandit and who a moorkha? Which is panthaa, the true path, and which is the opposite, the way of perversion? What is Swarga and what is Naraka? Who is a kinsman and where is one's home?

Who is an adhyah, wealthy, and who is the pauper? Who is pitiful and who the Lord? I beg you, answer these questions in their contrariness, O Lord of dharma.'

Sri Bhagavan said, 'Yama and Niyama are the observance, internally and externally, of non-violence, truth, of never being covetous, detachment, conscientiousness, generosity, belief in the Veda, restraint while speaking, constancy, forgiveness and courage. These are the twelve internal disciplines, known as Yama.

Niyama comprises twelve outward rigours: cleanliness, purity of thought, japa, tapas, homam, sraddha, aatithyam-or hospitality, adoring me, tirtha yatras, serving others, contentment, and serving the Guru with deep love and devotion. Those that observe Yama and Niyama attain whatever they desire, materially and spiritually.

Yama and Niyama are for everyone, but spiritual seekers, who aspire to moksha, undertake them more rigorously.

Sama is not mere tranquillity of mind; it is the deep rooting of the mind is me. Dama does not mean suppressing enemies, but mastering one's senses, oneself. Titiksha is more than patience or forbearance; it is a profound capacity to bear every torment and distress while discharging one's dharma. Dhriti is the ability to withstand that onslaught of the lusts of taste and sex: for the aspirant to moksha it is far more than passivity or stillness, even.

Param daanam, the highest charity, is not just giving alms; in the seeker it means renouncing the very tendency to harm any living being in the slightest way. The higher tapasya is not the scourging of the body with rituals like kricchra and chaandraayana; it is abstaining from all sexuality.

Shaurya, valour, does not consist in courage while facing an enemy, but involves heroism in ruthlessly vanquishing his own lower nature, his senses and animal instincts. Truth does not consist of not telling lies, but in seeing the living God everywhere.

The Maharishis say that rita means speech that is factual and always beneficial. Soucha, cleanliness, is to be detached in performing one's swadharma. Tyaga, renunciation, is, verily, Sannyasa, the abandonment of all worldliness, the mundane life.

Man's greatest wealth is not any possession, but dharma. The true yagna is God, not just a ritual sacrifice. Dakshina does not mean mere gifts of money or other material things; it involves the fervent service of one's Guru, which leads to acquiring knowledge. Real strength is pranayama, which enables the aspirant to control his mind; it is not mere strength of the body or its muscles.

Bhaga, bhagya or fortune, is to become actual part of my six divine bhagas: majesty, power, fame, Sri that combines beauty and fortune, wisdom and detachment. True labha, profit, is to find bhakti toward me, and not to be attached to wealth, children, a home, or other things of the world. Vidya is not mere knowledge but the complete dissolution of all sense of duality; it is knowing and becoming one with the Atman. Hri, shyness, is not common bashfulness, but the repugnance for evil, the absolute unwillingness to do evil.

True beauty comes from being austere and without desire, not from fine clothes or jewellery. Real happiness is to seek neither happiness nor sorrow, but to be detached in the face of both, to be imperturbable in every contingency. True misery accrues from seeking sexual gratification, and not from fire or other external calamities. The real gyani is not one that has bookish knowledge, but he that clearly knows the two conditions of samsara and mukti, and the difference between them.

The moorkha, or fool, is not merely he that has no learning but he that identifies himself with his body. The true path does not lead to any worldly gains, but is the way of renunciation that leads to me. The way of perversity is not merely a life of brigandage; the life of unrestrained indulgence in the senses and their world is equally perverse. Swarga is no place in Indra's heaven, but the awakening of the sattva guna.

Naraka is not a country called hell but the dominance of tamas. The true kinsman is the Guru, not one's brothers or sons. The Guru is me. The home is this body, and not a construction of bricks and mortar. The man of wealth is he that owns abundant virtue, not he that has money.

The pauper is ruled by greed and is never satisfied with anything he gets. Not possessing gold and lands does not make a man poor. The pathetic man is he that cannot control his senses. The master is he that controls his senses, their objects, and the gunas; while the slave is attached to and owned by these.

Uddhava, these are the answers to your questions; what I have said is a succinct deliberation on good and evil. Dear friend, what is the point of an elaborate discourse? To transcend the difference between good and evil is the virtue that liberates,' said Sri Krishna."

BHAKTI, GYANA, AND KARMA YOGA

SRI SUKA SAID, "UDDHAVA SAID,

'The Veda is your commandment, O Lord of all things, and it consists of many injunctions and prohibitions. Does this not assume that some deeds are good and should be undertaken, while others are evil and should be shunned?

Based upon good and evil, high and low, the Veda classifies so much: the varnas and their different dharmas; the differences between children born from the two kinds of marriage, Anuloma and Pratiloma*; the difference between heaven and hell; the nature of various places, materials, seasons and times appropriate for performing yagnas.

If one does not accept the ultimate distinction between good and evil, paapa and punya, how can one accept the Veda, which is your very Word? How can one accept the philosophy of moksha, liberation?

In all matters of the spirit, everything unseen and unattained, the Veda is the waylight for men, the Devas and the Pitrs. It is the means to understand the goal in this world of darkness, as well as the way to attain it.

From this your scriptural revelation, men know what is good and bad, not from their innate natures. I am bewildered to hear you say that liberation is to transcend good and evil and discover that there is no difference between them!'

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* Anuloma is where a man of a higher caste marries a woman from a lower varna, while Pratiloma is the opposite.

Sri Krishna said, 'I have ordained three kinds of spiritual communion for a man's enlightenment: gyana, karma and bhakti. Besides these Yogas, there is no other.

The gyana marga is for those who have outgrown Vedic rituals and their fruit, who renounce these in true spirit. The way of deeds, karma, is for those that still have desires, and do not yet feel revulsion for action and its results.

Bhakti is for one who, either by dint of his past karma or God's grace, discovers an ardent sraddha: devotion for listening to my legends, my Purana. Such a one is often neither possessed of fervid renunciation nor overly attached to things material.

A man need adhere to the Vedic ritual only until he grows disgusted by it, or until he finds true bhakti.

Uddhava, the man who performs his swadharma and yagnas as an offering to me, never desiring their fruit, who does not indulge in sin or lust, he shall find neither Swarga nor Naraka, but fine peace here in this very world.

Sinless one, such a man shall have his heart purified and discover the knowledge of the Atman. If he is extremely fortunate, he shall even find bhakti for me.

Even as those that are in Naraka, hellish purgatory, pray for a human body, so do the dwellers in Swarga. For it is only in a human body that gyana and bhakti can evolve; and not with the bodies of the other realms.

Thus, the intelligent man does not wish for the heavens, just as he does not desire the hells where jivas suffer for their sins. Yet, he must not be overly attached to his human body, either: for that will retard his spiritual evolution.

The man of discernment understands that he can find moksha with his human body, and pursues his final goal avidly, before death overtakes him.

When heartless Yamalike men cut down forests, the birds nesting in the branches of the trees fly away to safety and have no great attachment for their nests. A man should be aware that the tree that is his life is being hacked down with the passing of every night and day. Then he will become detached and leave desire behind him. He will meditate upon the Brahman and come to peace.

Obtaining a human body is the first necessity to tread the path of the spirit, the transcendent life. It is rare fortune to get a human body, this sturdy and fine ship whose captain is an excellent Guru and the wind in its sails my own grace. If still a man fails to use the ship of his great fortune to sail across the sea of samsara, he is a suicide, a murderer of his own soul.

When a man evolves into feeling an honest detestation for mundane dharma from seeing past the hollowness of worldly values, he comes to restraint and finds mastery over his senses. Now he should calm his mind by constant dhyana.

At first, the mind will fly in every direction, chaotically. The Yogi restrains it slowly, with great alertness, allowing it to go where it will and to dwell on what it will, which is not forbidden, and then gently drawing it back.

Once he has sway over the senses and his prana, he no longer allows the mind to roam free. He restrains it with his higher buddhi, an intellect purified by consuming only the most sattvic food and exposing himself to only the loftiest, noblest impressions of the world of the senses.

The final restraint of the mind is the highest Yoga. The seeker undertakes the exercise as a horse trainer breaks in a wild stallion – at first, allowing it some freedom, but holding the reins and gradually establishing firm control over its movements. Yes, that is how the aspirant restrains his mind.

Until the mind grows calm, the seeker meditates upon the origin and the growth of all things from Mahatattva to the Panchamahabhutas until their dissolution, their end. Then he reflects upon the process in reverse order, from the end to the beginning. This dhyana impresses the transitoriness of all things including his body and mind. His thought becomes fixed firmly upon the Brahman, the only reality that abides.

He that is disgusted by ritual, who has found renunciation, who has received knowledge from his Guru, will become detached from his body and not identify with it anymore. This comes from meditating upon the teaching of the preceptor.

The mind is fetched to dwell exclusively upon Godhood, the final objective of Yoga, either by the eight yogic disciplines that begin with yama, or by metaphysical analysis that is the gyana marga, or by the worship of my idols or other means of bhakti. The seeker must not use drugs or other means to still his mind.

If a seeker who practises Yoga, communion, commits any sin, he should burn it to ashes with Yoga and not by prayaschitta: any other code of penance.

What men call goodness is to work and live according to one's natural dharma and spiritual and moral ability. This regulates the pulls of desire and lust, which are tamasic and impure. All men cannot renounce every evil tendency at once. Detachment and renunciation are arrived at slowly, over lives, and by each man according to his inherent evolution and ability. However, good and evil may not be confused to suit individual limitations – the final goal remains immutable.

A seeker might have found strong faith in me and in the scriptures that speak of me. He might have come to detest karma and have understood that desire leads invariably to sorrow and pain. However, he might not have the will of the circumstances required to be a pure renunciate.

Such a seeker can continue to worship me, with joy and determination, and to fulfil his desires at the same time. Yet, he should always be aware that the worldly life is a base and sinful one, for his bhakti will soon raise him up beyond it.

When a man practises the rigours of bhakti, with no break, I come to dwell in his heart. My presence will destroy the desires in such a heart.

When a seeker realises me, who am the soul of all things, his ego, which is the knot of bondage in his heart, is severed. All his doubts about the existence of God and the Atman vanish, and the power of prarabdha karma, karma of the past, which held him as in a vice, is loosened.

The man of bhakti, whose heart rests constantly in me, has no need of gyana or tyaga. Those disciplines can only distract him from his pure devotion by which he will attain me.

A man of bhakti, if he wishes, can effortlessly attain everything that those that tread the other paths can gain – the Vedic ritualists, the tapasvins, the gyanis, the yogins, the men of vairagya, the daanis – be they the Swargas of the Gods, Moksha, or Vaikuntha.

Yet true bhaktas, men of absolute devotion, do not want or accept even moksha, not if I offer it to them myself. They do not seek even liberation from the wheel of birth and death.

Nishreya, the final and infinite beatitude, is the condition of the man who has no desire of any kind. Bhakti dawns only on such men, who want nothing from me: not material or worldly gain, or even moksha.

True Sadhus, of unshakeable devotion, perfectly equanimous in every situation, who transcend buddhi, the intellect, are beyond the paapa and punya as set down in the Shastras. They are beyond being affected by what the scriptures forbid.

Those that follow the bhakti marga of surrender attain to the ultimate Grace, which is also the Parabrahman,' said Krishna,"

Sri Suka said.

THE REALM OF PAAPA AND PUNYA

"THE LORD KRISHNA CONTINUED, 'MEN THAT IGNORE THE PATHS OF bhakti, gyana and karma, which lead to moksha, but blindly indulge the base lusts of their fleeting senses, go from birth to birth, and are bound by their karma, good and evil, punya and paapa.

Men that do karma that is in accordance with their swadharma perform punya, and those that go against their natural dharma indulge in paapa. Virtue and vice are judged not by any inherent good or evil but by the relevance of any action toward the spiritual evolution of a jiva; they are relative, not absolute.

However, the system of dharma, the moral code, has been laid down to check a man from following the wayward paths of the lusts of his senses and first of all by planting the seed in his heart that these might not be appropriate for him, and that they might lead him from grief to grief.

For those that are compulsively sensual and extraverted, I have created the Smritis. These laws are meant to help a man progress spiritually, stage by stage, in any given set of circumstances. Some Smritis are only helpful for practical everyday living; others deal exclusively with life-threatening and other dangerous situations, and how to cope with them. None of the Smritis is absolute: their only aim is to gradually draw a man to turn his attention inward, to seek his spirit within himself.

From Brahma down to immobile trees, all things are created from the same Panchabhutas in union with Atman, soul.

Since they are all created from the same five elements, in essence they are all the same. Yet, they have evolved different forms, names and natures for the jiva to slowly achieve the four purusharthas: dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Thus, the Vedas have classified all these different beings, according to their natures and abilities, and laid down different laws for their individual growth, their evolution.

Uddhava, the sole reason for there being laws of what can be done and what is forbidden is to limit karma. These laws deal with place and time, with the fruit of actions, with who can perform what karma, ritual or sacrifice, using which ingredients.

Where the krishnasara, the black buck, does not roam and where brahmanas are not revered, that land is impure. Even where the black buck is found, parts of the Keekata country, places where decadent or uncultured people live, and deserts in general, are considered impure.

The auspicious time for the performance of a ritual is determined by what ingredients for worship are available and by certain innate qualities of the hour, the day and the season. Seasons when auspicious ingredients are not available, or times that are inherently inauspicious, or when there are other external obstacles present are naturally unsuitable and considered improper for performing holy rites.

The purity or impurity of an ingredient is judged by what else it has been in contact with, by what authorities on these matters say, by purifications, by the lapse of time and by size.

Water, as a ritual ingredient, is suitable for washing, sprinkling and cleansing. However, if it comes in contact with urine it becomes impure. A word from a brahmana can help one decide what is pure or not.

Water is used to purify flowers and other offerings at worship, but water that has been kept for ten days becomes unsuitable for this. A small tank or pool will become impure by the contact of impure men, but not a large lake or a flowing river.

A man's natural strengths and frailties, his knowledge and ignorance, his wealth or poverty determine what is pure or forbidden for him. While a strong healthy man must never eat during an eclipse, a sick or weak man should.

When a child is born, if one hears the news within ten days this causes some harm, while there is no impurity involved if the news comes after the tenth day. If a wealthy man wear old or ragged clothes there is sin in it, but not for a poor man.

Above everything else, when some calamity or natural disaster occurs in the land, all these ordinary conceptions of what is pure and what is not cease to be relevant. Thus, vice and virtue, paapa and punya, are relative never absolute.

The elements – air, fire, earth, water and sky – as well as time, purify grain, wooden utensils for puja, objects made from ivory, cloth, oils, gold and silver, other precious metals, skins and earthen pots. They do this singly or in combination.

The purifier is the agent by which a befouled object or substance is made clean again: cleansed of dirt and stink.

A man about to undertake a yagna or any sacred ritual is purified by water, by giving charity, by austerity, the attainment of the proper age and ability, purificatory rites like upanayanam, sandhya rites, and meditating upon the Brahman. Before performing any yagna or holy ritual a dwija must purify himself by at least one of these methods.

The seeker is purified by a mantra when he receives it from his Guru. His karma is purified when he offers it to me. To deserve being called dharma, in the true Vedic sense, a ritual must be subjected to six purifications: of time, of place, of substance, of mantra, of the performer of the yagna and of the yagna itself. Without these, a rite is adharma.

What is dharma in one context can be adharma in another, by Vedic law. So, too, what is paapa can become punya. A brahmana must not accept any gift during normal times. But during times of danger or turmoil, he may do so.

Not to care for his home is adharma for a grihasta, while it is a Sannyasin's solemn dharma. The very contrariness involved in determining what is dharma and what adharma, for whom and when, affects their distinction.

What is sinful for a morally superior man, or a man of high station in life, need not be a crime for a lowborn man, a fallen one, a habitual sinner, one that belongs to a different order of life, race or species, or for a man of low evolution.

Drink and wanton living will not harm an unevolved man but will be great paapa for a morally developed one. A grihasta incurs no paapa by being attached to his possessions and family, or by cohabiting with his wife. For the Sannyasin it is sinful.

In short, a man who is already supine can fall no lower, but an upright or lofty person can certainly fall.

There is a single lesson to be gleaned from the mutable and less than rigid nature of dharma and adharma: gradually, comfortably, to whatever extent he can, a man should withdraw from the pursuit of his desires, from rituals, and pursue vairagya, true renunciation.

The extent of his freedom shall be directly proportionate to the degree of his relinquishment. This is the path that will lead a seeker out of sorrow, delusion and fear, and to eternal bliss.

Men begin to hanker after the objects of the senses and to become attached to them in the mistaken belief that these will bestow happiness. When such desire intensifies into mad lust, conflict breaks out between men.

From conflict fury is born. Delusion follows swiftly on the heels of anger and the inability to distinguish right from wrong, dhama from adharma. Blind delusion rapidly consumes a man's moral sense.

Ah my precious friend, a man's humanity dies within him, why, he himself is as good as dead. He loses every noble value, all the spiritual evolution that might be obtained from a human birth.

Such a man eats like some tree and breathes like a pair of bellows. Entangled in the pleasures of his senses he knows nothing about his own true nature, and he leaves any love for others and compassion behind him.

The karma kanda of the Veda is enticing, promising many pleasures in return for the performance of rituals. It does not illumine a man about his ultimate welfare. However, these rituals are meant to awaken the inert, tamasic man to take the first steps on the path to the final goal – rather like enticing a child with the promise of sweets.

Man's lower nature tends toward sensual enjoyments, material advancement and to the promotion of the interests of his kith and kin. All these hinder his spiritual evolution.

Then how will a focus of divine wisdom like the Veda – to which unregenerate men ranging the outer wastes of sin and grief reverently look for guidance – confirm their sensual lives? Nothing could be more absurd. Thus the karma kanda, the section of rituals, must be viewed obliquely, subtly, and not as a final pronouncement.

Men of dim and perverse intelligence take the karma kanda of the Veda, with its elaborate descriptions of the fine fruits of yagnas, literally, as being a final end in itself, but not true seers of the Veda like Vyasa Muni.

Riddled with desire, greedy, lustful and pathetic, the dim-witted ones mistake the blooms of the fleeting pleasures of Swarga for the ultimate fruit of Satchitananda. Deluded by the absolute belief in fire sacrifices and their efficacy, they finally find a way of smoke for themselves, without ever discovering the true nature of their own Atman.

Men plunged in a fog cannot see what is nearest to them: so, too, these blind ritualists, whose only objective is sensual pleasure, do not see or know Me, who are the source of the universe, not though I dwell in their very hearts.

If the people want to eat meat, let them do so only at a sacrifice. Let this be no commandment that they must consume flesh at every yagna, but that they may if they wish.

My views on this matter have been stated only indirectly in the passages of the Veda that deal with the slaughter of animals at sacrifices. However, savage sensual men use these passages to arrange the most cruel and bloody yagnas to make offerings to lesser deities, to their own ancestors, and to elementals. All this they do to satisfy their baser instincts and, most of all, the craving for meat.

Even as a greedy merchant loses his wealth in speculation, gambling, so too these bestial sacrificers waste animal lives expecting wondrous enjoyments in heavenly realms, all of which are as substantial as dreams, although they are delightful indeed to hear described in the karma kanda.

Ruled themselves by the three gunas of Prakriti, men worship Devas like Indra and the others, who also are subject to sattva, rajas and tamas and are akin to the worshippers themselves. But they do not worship Me, who am beyond the gunas.

Even the worship and other offerings made to Indra and the Devas are all made only to me, because I am the innate Soul of all these Gods. But the men that offer the Devas worship do not realise this and adore the Gods' external forms, subject to the gunas. Their worship does not take them forward along the path of bhakti.

The karma kanda will tell such a man that he can perform yagnas to the Devas in this life and enjoy their heavens when he dies. And when the fruit of his ritual sacrifices is exhausted he shall be born again into a noble, high family and become a great grihasta, who can yet again perform yagnas, and so on.

And believing such passages literally, the proud and vain ones will begin ever to loathe the very mention of my name, or of the Brahman that I am.

The Veda has three sections that deal with karma, rituals, with upasana, meditation, and with gyana, which is both knowledge and devotion. The fundamental aim of the Veda is to lead the jiva to the attainment of his Atman and the Brahman.

The language of the Veda is subtle and oblique – it speaks in lofty riddles. I favour this manner of expression because, otherwise, if all were made clear to everyone, even men that are fit only for karma would abandon karma, too, and lapse into the sloth of tamas.

The Veda is the Sabda Brahman, with its three subtle levels of manifestation: para, pasyanti and madhyama. It is expressed through prana and the mind, as well as the outward articulation as vaikhari, or speech. Para, pasyanti and madhyama are all inaudible and the Veda is infinite, fathomless as the cosmic sea, and hard indeed to understand.

Like the slim filament within a lotus stalk, the Sabda Brahman pervades all creation and enlightened men hear it as transcendent Nada. This Brahman springs from me, and is immutable and omnipotent.

As the spider fetches his web out from his heart, through his mouth, the Parabrahman, the embodiment of the Veda and abode of eternal bliss, manifests as Hiranyagarbha and fetches Sunya, the Void, from his heart. He does this using Nada, Spirit sound, and through the mind, which creates the audible Veda out of Pranava, sacred AUM.

Wondrous is the language of the Veda. It employs several meters, and each one has four alphabets more than the one that precedes it. Infinite is its scope and plumbless its profundity. Hiranyagarbha thus extrudes the Veda from his heart and it has a limitless vocabulary and many are its meters.

The Gayatri of twenty-four letters is the first meter of the Veda. Those that follow it, each one four letters longer that the last, are Ushnik, Anushtup, Brihati, Pankti, Trishtup, Jagati, Aticchandas, Atyashti, Atijagati and Virat.

Only I know the hidden truth in the dictates of the karma kanda; only I know what the expositions of upasana kanda mean; only I truly understand the initial declarations of the gyana kanda, all of which are later refuted.

The ritual commandments of the karma kanda are all my own Self, in the form of Yagna. The Gods described and eulogised in the upasana kanda are all manifestations of me. The assumptions and negations of the gyana kanda are also my Self: for, initially, the Veda appears to accept the reality of the universe as an expression of my maya. Journeying through samsara, the jiva finally attains me and then it denies the universe of forms and achieves its final goal. This is what the Veda accomplishes; this is its only true function,' said Krishna."

THE ATMAN

SRI SUKA SAID, "UDDHAVA ASKED KRISHNA,

'Lord, how many tattvas are there in truth, which the Rishis recognise as such? I have heard different views about this. I have heard you say that there are twenty-eight tattvas, which are divided into groups of nine, eleven, five and three.

Others say that there are twenty-six tattvas and still others that they are twenty-five in number. Yet others speak of them as being seven, nine, six and four, while there are those that say eleven.

Lord, I have met those who say there are seventeen, sixteen or thirteen tattvas. I would hear from you why different Sages have expressed such divergent views about the pristine tattvas of nature.'

Sri Krishna said, 'All these different views are acceptable because all the tattvas are included in them either as causes or effects. Where there appear to be variances in the count is where the tattvic effects are included in the causative categories. Also, anyone that accepts that all creation is my maya will have no problem in accepting apparently contradictory philosophies!

When one Sage tells another, "My philosophy is superior to yours", that is my maya too, for the Rishi's nature is subject to the three gunas. Different minds are dominated by different gunas and the natural dispositions make it hard for a man to comprehend or accept a view that differs from his own, held because of his nature.

It is from the varying dominance of the gunas in anyone's nature that controversies are born. When the heart is purified and transcends sattva, rajas and tamas, and when the senses are brought under control, all differences melt away.

The tattvas, O Purusharishabha, interpenetrate, as cause and effect; so the Samkhyas can enumerate them differently according to their inherent natures and their divergent perspectives.

Whether a tattva manifests as cause or as effect, every other tattva is inherent in it: just as every earthen vessel or object contains mud. For the three gunas that cause the tattvas are implicit in them all, and the tattvas in the gunas.

I am glad to accept whatever the Samkhyas say variously about the tattvas – how many they are – for each one has a point of view that is equally valid and reasonable according to his nature.

Philosophers who say that the Atman and Ishwara are fundamentally different contend that, since the Atman is under the spell of avidya from the beginning of time, he can never liberate himself without the grace of another being who has always been free. That being is Ishwara and he is apart from the Jiva.

Other metaphysicians hold the view that there is no difference whatever between Ishwara and Jiva. As for the jiva being guided by gyana, they say gyana is the sattva guna present in Prakriti.

When the three gunas are in perfect balance that condition represents Prakriti as a whole. The gunas belong to Prakriti and not to the Atman. The gunas cause creation, nurture and destruction: rajas, sattva and tamas do, respectively.

Thus sattva is identified with buddhi and gyana, rajas with karma, and tamas with agyana. Kaala stirs the gunas, and svabhava or nature is time's agent.

The sources are nine, which I created: Purusha, Prakriti, Mahatattva, Ahamkara and the five Tanmatras. The tattvas that I illumined are eleven: the five organs of knowledge, the five of action, speech and the others, and the mind that supports all these.

When the tattvas are counted as being five, the five manifest elements, it is the objects of the five senses – hearing, touch, taste, smell and sight – to which the Rishis refer. The five forms of karma – movement, speech, excretion, generation and manual actions – are not tattvas but functions of the organs of karma.

Prakriti has two states: the causal and the manifest. When time begins and creation, causal Prakriti becomes animated by the three gunas and evolves into this multifarious universe. The immutable Purusha does not participate in this process, but is invariably only a witness.

Yet the gaze of the Purusha makes the evolutes of Nature, like Mahatattva, potent to create. These are sustained by Prakriti, and the eleven combine to create the Brahmanada, the Cosmic Egg.

There are those that enumerate the tattvas as being seven. They count the five tanmatras, the subtle elements, the jiva, who is the witness, and the Atman upon which the rest are founded. They say that from these entities the senses, energy and everything else issued.

There is a view that says the basic entities are six. Here the Panchamahabhutas are counted, and the Paramatman is the sixth. The five Mahabhutas emerge from the Paramatman, and he fashions the universe with these and enters it as jiva. Here, the jiva is seen to be part of the Paramatman.

Another school of thought says that the tattvas are four: earth, fire and water, born from the Atman, and the Atman himself the fourth.

For the school that counts the tattvas as being seventeen the count is thus: the five Mahabhutas, their five subtle Tanmatras, the five Indriyas, and Manas the mind, and the Atman.

Those that say there are sixteen tattvas have the same count as the ones who count seventeen, except that they count Manas as being part of the Atman. Others say there are thirteen tattvas – the five elements, the five senses, the mind, the jivatman and the Paramatman.

The school of eleven tattvas enumerates the five elements, the five senses and the Atman. The philosophers of this school count manas, jivatma and Atman as being one. The school of nine tattvas includes the eight Prakritis and Purusha as being the ninth.

Thus, the Munis have varying views about the number of tattvas that exist, and their true purpose is not merely to count the tattvas but to distinguish the Purusha from them. All these theories have their own merit, for the words of wise men are invariably meaningful.'

Uddhava said, 'Krishna, Prakriti and Purusha are certainly very different, yet it is hard to distinguish them because they are always to be found together. The Atman is seen in a body and a body with the Atman.

Omniscient One, clear this doubt of mine for me. Ah, how lucid and persuasive your arguments are!

Your Atmamaya is the source of the avidya of all jivas. Only you know the secret of how your maya works, for only you have perfect and complete knowledge.'

Krishna replied, 'Purusharishabha, have no doubt that Prakriti and Purusha are entirely separate from each other. This body, which in fact is a progression of mutations, is a product of the combinations of the gunas.

My maya uses the three gunas to generate the difference in objects and the manner in which they are perceived. However, all these ongoing mutations happen in three realms, the adhyatmika, the adhidaivika and the adhibhautika: those of the Self, those of the Gods, and those of the creatures.

For example, take seeing or sight. The eye is adhyatmika, the forms and colours it sees are adhibhautika, and the aspect of Surya Deva contained in the act of seeing is adhidaivika.

Without the power of the Sun God, the Devata, the eye could not see; the triune aspects, atmika, daivata and bhautika, interpenetrate. However, the Sun in the sky, from whom the eye derives its daivika power, is independent of the eye and shines by himself. This holds true for all the senses, each with its own Deity.

The Deities, in turn, depend on the Atman for their existence. The Atman is independent of them. He alone illumines himself: he is swayamprakasha, while the other Devas are illumined by him. Only he can reveal himself, and he is beyond the body and its functions.

Ahamkara, the ego, causes the delusion of manifoldness. Ahamkara, with its three aspects of sattva, raja and tamas, evolves from Mahatattva, which evolves from Pradhana, by Time agitating the gunas and the tattvas emerging from that agitation.

The Atman is self illumined and it reveals itself with its own light, as well as everything else. Yet, the great dispute continues about what exists and what does not. All disputes and arguments are relevant only if one accepts that reality is divided and manifold. They exist only for he whose heart is turned away from me: they are illusions that will persist until the jiva attains to me, they are like dreams that dissolve when the dreamer awakens.'

Uddhava said, 'Lord, tell me how the power of their own karma carries jivas, whose faces are turned away from you, to higher and lower births. Tell me how these jivas leave their bodies when death comes.

Govinda, no philosopher who has not restrained his mind and his senses can understand or teach this. Most men are deluded by your maya and there are few indeed who are truly enlightened and can speak with any authority on this subject.'

The good Lord said, 'The mind, in combination with the five indriyas and karma: these constitute the linga sarira. This spirit body transmigrates, from birth to birth. The Atman is apart from the linga sarira, yet they are interpenetrative and the Atman goes with the jiva from one life to another.

Under the spell of his own karma, the mind of a dying man dwells intensely on the experiences of his life: what he has seen, heard and done. With this fervid thought he enters into a new body, or thinks he does, and with that the old body ceases to be animated and to exist as a living being in the world.

Intensely attracted to the new body, the jiva completely forgets the old one. Death means just that – the effacement of the every memory of the life of the previous body and everything of that life.

O great hearted Uddhava, when a jiva identifies completely with a new body and accepts it that is called birth! It is like a dream or a totally absorbing reverie.

As in a dream, the jiva forgets his old life and unites with the new one. He believes there was no other life before the new one; he believes this is when he first came to be.

The mind is the only support of all the faculties, the senses and the rest. The mind's creative power causes the triune divisive experience, the great delusion, to arise in the Atman. The experience is of the world within, the world outside, and of the objects in the outside world. In a dream, too, the dreamer experiences a dream world and so many objects and events in that world, all due to the mind's creativity, its power of imagination.

Dear Uddhava, time moves at speed that defies perception; every moment countless new bodies are being born and old ones are dying. The ignorant do not perceive this subtle, ceaseless process.

Flames of new fires are constantly being lit and old ones being extinguished; the river flows by; trees bear fresh fruit, while other fruit fall. So, too, time takes away old bodies and brings new ones into being. All the living are ageing without pause, dying and being born again.

In a fire the flames are not the same from moment to moment; yet those that watch see the same fire. The water in a river is not the same from one moment to the next, yet it appears to be the same river. Resemblance is mistaken for identity. In exactly the same manner, fools speak of the man of today as being the same one of the previous day, although yesterday's man has long ceased to be, and for ever.

Why, even the ignorant man does not ever die, because not his spirit is born from the fruit of karma. He, too, is immortal. Fire is always latent in arani sticks; only rubbing them together either causes them to burn or to remain unmanifest.

Conception, being a foetus, birth, infancy, childhood, youth, middle age, old age and death: these are the nine stages of the evolution and decay of the body, but not of the spirit.

These nine are the products of the imagination. But the jiva identifies with the body and thus takes these upon him. Very few are those that overcome this condition: they do so by the grace of God!

A man sees his father dying and his son being born and infers that he, too, goes and comes like that. However, the Atman, who is the knower of the birth and the death of the body, beside whom there is no other, is not subject to being born or dying. He is the seer and thus cannot be the seen.

The Atman is like a man that watches a plant sprouting from its seed, growing to fullness, then decaying and dying. The man is not the plant. The Soul is the knower of the body and its changes; he is always apart from the body.

The body is an evolute of Prakriti. The ignorant man identifies himself with the body, becomes entangled in the world of sense objects, and thus, also, in the wheel of samsara, of births and deaths.

Karma determines what sort of body a jiva acquires. If the karma is predominantly sattvik, the jiva bound in avidya gets the body of a Deva or a Rishi. If rajas dominates, he is born as an Asura or a man. If tamas rules, the jiva is born as a bhuta, a pisacha or as an animal.

When you watch a dancer or listen to a singer, in your mind you dance and sing with the artist by identifying with them, though you do not yourself actually either sing or dance. So, also, the buddhi draws the inherently actless jiva into identifying with karma and with samsara.

Trees reflected in water seem to move when the breeze stirs the water's surface. To eyes that spin round, whatever they see seems to spin as well.

Uddhava, just as the pleasures of a dream or a reverie are unreal, so, too, are the experiences of the jiva in this samsara.

Dreams are the products of a man's constant brooding, and they persist as long as the man is asleep. Just as the dream ends when the sleeper awakens, so also does the dream of samsara when the jiva awakens to the Truth.

So, Uddhava never pursue the pleasures of the senses or abandon yourself to them. They are treacherous and it is only because you do not know the Atman that your mind is drawn to them, through delusion.

A seeker after the Brahman is often persecuted. Evil men will abuse him, insult him, ridicule and humiliate him, imprison him, deprive him of his livelihood, spit on him, urinate or defecate upon him, persecute him for his faith. Why, there is no dangerous situation into which he cannot fall.

He should remain unmoved in all these, absorbed in the Atman, unshakeable, and view all these as the results of past karma, which no longer affect him for he has immersed himself in the infinite Soul.'

Uddhava asked, 'Most intelligent one of all, tell me how a man might attain to such a state of mind. Only your bhaktas, who follow the Bhagavata Dharma and have found the final peace at the sanctuary of your holy feet, can be even-minded in the face of such torment. Let a man be both learned and wise, his nature will still compel him to react when he is insulted, humiliated or persecuted.' "

Sri Suka said.

THE SONG OF THE MENDICANT

SAID SRI SUKA, "THE LORD KRISHNA WAS BORN INTO THIS WORLD AS the chief of the Yadus, and the description of his powers and deeds are the most exalting legends a man can hear. When he heard what Uddhava asked he seemed to approve of the question and answered his bhakta thus.

Said the worshipful Lord, 'Barhaspatya, O sishya of Brihaspati, hardly anyone in this world can restrain his mind when the words of evil men agitate it.

Why, not arrows aimed at the marmas of the body strike one as sharply as the barbs of abuse of the evil-hearted.

Uddhava, enlightened men have a traditional and sacred legend among them, in which they tell about this same subject. Listen, I will tell it to you now.

It is the tale of a mendicant, whom some evil men abused and ill-treated, and who bore it all calmly as the fruit of his own karma.

In the land of Avanti there lived a wealthy brahmana, whose livelihood was farming and trade. He was choleric, greedy and miserly, too.

When relatives or guests visited his home, he would not so much as greet them with a word of welcome. Why, so miserly was he that his home scarcely had provisions to meet his own needs, or those of his family.

His sons and the rest of his household daily felt the oppression of his miserliness. His wife, daughters and servants were so dejected always that they did not bother to look after him or please him in any manner.

He watched over his hoarded wealth like a bhuta, never sharing it with those with whom he must, by Panchyagna – that is, the Devas, Rishis, Pitrs, bhutas and men. They, too, were displeased with him. The brahmana's spirit never evolved; he would not find any joy in this life or the next.

Soon, the displeasure of the Gods of the Panchayagna took away his punya from him and with it went even his ability to accumulate wealth. He worked harder than ever, yet his money slipped through his fingers like sand. His fortune was lost.

Cunning relatives took some of his wealth, thieves laid their hands on some of it, while fire, accident, arid seasons, and the tribute he had to pay to kings deprived him of the rest.

Now that he had no means to perform his swadharma or even to feed them, his family deserted him. Fear and anxiety filled the brahmana as darkness closed over him.

Pangs of despair convulsed the brahmana and he sobbed. Suddenly, by God's grace, a strange tide of emotion rose in his heart: a vast revulsion for things mundane, for all material values.

He thought, "Ah, in vain did I labour and garner wealth, because I used none of what I earned either for dharma or kama. The hoarded wealth of a miser never brings happiness; its only reward is anxiety in this life and naraka in the hereafter.

As a patch of leukoderma mars an otherwise perfect human form, even the smallest miserliness stains a good reputation and upright character.

It takes great effort to earn money, make it grow and to protect it. Even when wealth has been acquired, spending it and enjoying it cause worry and even fear, while if it is lost, dreadful dejection results and brings a man to the edge of madness.

The Sages have said that wealth creates fifteen vices in men – thievery, murder, falsehood, hypocrisy, greed, anger, egotism, pride, partiality, rancour, suspiciousness, jealousy, lustfulness, gambling and drunkenness.

Thus, those that seek moksha renounce wealth from afar, knowing that artha is, in fact, anaratha, the root of all evil.

For the sake of a few gold coins, one's nearest kin – brothers, wives, parents and others – who lived together as if they were one, turn into vicious enemies!

An argument over some trifle suffices to make them forget the love they bear one another. Rage seizes them and they wish even to kill each other.

Imagine gaining a human birth, especially as a brahmana – something that the Devas hanker after – and squandering it over a petty trifle, instead of using it to strive for moksha.

He that does not properly use a human birth, which verily is a doorway to Swarga and Mukti, is not worthy of being called human. He that instead runs after money, which fetches every evil and sorrow into the brief time given to him, cannot be called a man.

He that hoards his wealth, like some treasure-hoarding Yaksha, never giving his due share to the Devas, Rishis, Pitrs, the elements, his relatives and friends, and others that have claim to it – that man is doomed to a terrible fall.

I lost all my finer values out of my overweening love for gold, and now my strength, my life and even my wealth have deserted me. Wise men use their money as a means to liberation. I am an old man now, decrepit and my life laid waste; whatever will I do now?

What I cannot understand is why the wisest men, who well know the evil that results from the pursuit of wealth, still chase after it insanely, despite every hardship they encounter on their way. Surely, the whole world is under the spell of the Lord's omnipotent maya.

All men live in the mouth of the great serpent Death. Of what use is wealth to him and those that enable him to acquire it? Of what use are the pleasures he enjoys with his wealth and those that help him do so?

Ah, today finally the worshipful Lord Hari, who embodies all the Gods, has blessed me that he has brought me to this pass and this understanding. His grace has given me the boat of wisdom in which to cross the sea of samsara.

I will dedicate whatever little time remains to me to seeking the Atman. I will perform every penance toward that end, subject myself to the sternest austerities.

May all the Gods that rule the three worlds bless me. The King Khatvanga attained Brahmaloka in the flash of an eye because he had the Lord's grace. Why should this not happen to me?"

With new hope in his desolate spirit, and fresh resolve, the brahmana of Avanti relinquished the tangled desires that enmeshed his heart. Becoming peaceful, he took up the life of a Sannyasin, a mendicant.

Controlling his senses, his mind and prana, he ranged across the Earth, going into towns or villages only to beg for alms. He was detached now and in no way showed off his greatness, though great he had become.

Uddhava, dear friend, evil men persecuted the brahmana, taunting and humiliating him in countless ways, when they saw him old, helpless and clad in valakala and rags.

Some pulled his staff; some tipped his water pot over or his begging bowl. Some kicked the seat from under him; some would pull away his prayer beads, while others tore strips from his valakala or any other rags that he wore.

Taunting him mercilessly, some would return what they grabbed from him, only to wrench it away again. The more vile among these tormentors urinated into his food, his holy alms, while he sat upon a river's bank, eating. Others spat on the crown of his head.

They did all this to try to make him protest, to break his mowna, his vow of silence. Failing to get a word out of him, they would beat him up and still he would not speak, nor protest.

There were those that tried to frighten him by crying that he was a thief, and others that bound him hand and foot.

Some called him a hypocrite, saying that he had lost everything he had and been abandoned by his family and friends, and that he had become a Sannyasi only to deceive everyone.

Some cried sarcastically, "How remarkable this is! This fellow has fortitude that would make a mountain proud. He remains as silent as a crane, and as determined, and achieves his purpose." And they laughed raucously.

There were those that turned their backs to him and passed wind in his face, hooting with laughter, while there were those that bound him or caged him, even, and treated him like a pet animal or bird.

Other torments came to him, too, from sources supernatural, from within his own mind, and he endured them all in patience and silence, thinking of them as being just his prarabdha karma.

Truly, the agents of evil did their utmost to shake him from his swadharma and his resolve, but he remained sattvika and imperturbable.

The dwija said: "These men cause me no suffering or joy, nor does any Deva, planet, karma, time or even my self. The mind is the only cause for the turning of the wheel of samsara.

The mind is powerful and creates the senses and their functions. From these, comes karma, which is comprised of the three gunas. From karma, according to their dominant essence, come the various beings – Gods, men and beasts.

The Atman is indeed the jiva's nearest friend. Yet the Atman remains outside the scope of karma and samsara, always a witness to the mind and the deeds of the senses, never a participant. The jiva, however, identifies itself with the mind, whose restless activity projects the universe of samsara onto the Atman. By this imaginary identification – for the jiva's true nature is that of the Atman – the jiva appears to enjoy and suffer from the karma of the mind.

Charity, performing one's swadharma, keeping one's senses and mind tranquil, the study of the scriptures, every sort of vow and ritual, all have but a single aim: the control of the mind. When the mind is conquered, it finds samadhi, and becomes established in peace. This is the highest Yoga.

If a man's mind has already found single-pointedness and calmness, of what further use are austerity, charity and the rest to him? So, too, of what use are they if the mind continues to hanker after sensual pleasures or is plunged in the stupor of tamas?

The senses are all subject to the mind, but not the mind to them. Manas is formidable, the most powerful thing that exists. He that subdues his own mind is truly a jitendriya, a master of all his senses.

The speed of the mind is inconceivable and it invades and controls every marma, every vital part. Without ever trying to vanquish this almost invincible enemy, as near to us as ourselves, we foolishly pick fights outside ourselves, or form what we think are friendships, other enmities or acquaintances.

Deluded that one is one's body, which is actually a creation of the mind, we look upon ourselves as being apart from others, from the rest of creation, and thus lose ourselves hopelessly in the night of samsara.

For argument's sake, let us accept that it is indeed other people that cause us joy and sorrow. But the Atman is the Spirit and not the body, and is the same in every body. Hence, if any pleasure or pain is indeed being caused, it is by oneself to oneself. When you bite your own tongue you scarcely blame yourself!

If, however, we say that the causes of pleasure and pain are the Gods that rule the limbs that inflict or experience the sensation, pleasant or unpleasant, then, too, the Atman remains unaffected. It is like striking one's left arm with the right, for the Gods that rule the limbs that strike and are struck are the same. Who shall feel rage at whom?

If, on the other hand, we contend that the Atman does evolve and fetches joy and sorrow upon himself, even then he that causes and he that experiences are the same being. Who is to blame whom? There is no second; the Atman is the only reality.

Let us say that the planets cause happiness and misery: of what consequence are these trifles to the Atman who is Un-born and immortal? For pleasure and pain, sorrow and happiness, which the planets bring and take away, are confined to the body, which is born and dies. The influence of the planets is thus temporary, lasting for as long as the body does. The great masters of astrology say that the planets only influence one another: that they are at play with one another, by their many positions, conjunctions, aspects and transits. The Atman is beyond their scope. Mortal human bodies might, indeed, be affected by planetary motions, but only because they are identified with a constellation and because they are subject to time. The Atman remains transcendent, and a witness.

There are those that hold that karma causes happiness and misery. The Atman, however, is actless, and karma does not affect the Atman. The body is always inert and the Atman forever conscious. Karma is said to affect what is both inert and conscious. No such thing exists, so how can karma exist, let alone what karma is meant to cause – sukha and dukha?

If Time, Kaala, is the cause of sukhadukha, how can it affect the Atman, or change the Atman in any way? For the Atman is Kaala. Fire does not burn its own flames, nor does the cold melt pieces of ice. The Atman is beyond sukha and dukha, beyond all the pairs of opposites, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow. Who, then, can one blame for what one experiences? At whom shall I be angry?

The Ahamkara, the sense of I-ness, which experiences the wheel of births and deaths, is attracted to the pairs of opposites – heat and cold, pleasure and pain, vice and virtue, and the rest. To the supreme Atman, none of these pertain. Only he that has not awakened to this truth is subject to fear.

I will follow the way of the Rishis of the past and live by the discipline of seeking the Atman. I will worship the holy feet of the Lord Mukunda and swiftly shall I cross over the dark sea of avidya."

So said the brahmana who had lost all his possessions. He roamed the Holy Land and never swerved an inch from his swadharma, not when evil men persecuted him in the most atrocious ways. He remained steadfast in the face of every provocation, hazard and obstacle.

All this samsara, which creates apparent distinctions of friend, enemy and neutral, is no more than a delusion of the mind. It is a creation of ignorance.

Uddhava, turn your mind fervently toward me and do your best to restrain the mind itself. This is the essence of all Yoga.

I say to you, whoever listens to the story and the song of the bhikshu, the brahmana that lost all his material possessions but found his Atman, shall be blessed. For it deals with how the self becomes established in the Brahman and causes those that hear it to turn their minds inward and to overcome the dualities of samsara,' said the Lord Krishna."

CREATION AND DISSOLUTION

"KRISHNA CONTINUED, 'LET ME TELL YOU NOW, UDDHAVA, ABOUT THE Samkhya Yoga that the wisest men of yore taught, awesome ones like Kapila. Knowing this Yoga, men would transcend all feelings of duality.

This multifarious samsara, with its fundamental delusion of seer and seen, subject and object, in truth is one, in Pure Consciousness. In Pralaya, when creation begins and in the minds of the enlightened, that Single Consciousness alone abides.

My impenetrable maya makes that Single Chitta appear to become two – the perceiver and the perceived, subject and object.

Of the two, Prakriti is the seen, the object, the perceived universe and the other is the Purusha, the perceiver, and the subject.

My maya, as Kaala, agitates Prakriti. Because of the prarabdha karma of the jivas plunged in Prakriti, its three aspects emerge – sattva, rajas and tamas.

From the gunas comes the Sutratma, the Pervasive self and from the Sutratma, the Mahatattva. These two are identical, being known as Sutra when krishakti, action, dominates and Mahatattva when gyanashakti rules. Mahatattva, metamorphosed, creates Ahamkara, which causes delusion.

Ahamkara, which combines aspects conscious and unconscious, comprises three aspects, each ruled by sattva, rajas and tamas. From Ahamkara come the Tanmatras, the essences of the five elements, the Indriyas or senses, and the Devas that rule the senses.

The Panchabhutas evolved from the Tanmatras, and from the tamas in Ahamkara. From the rajas in Ahamkara emerged the Indriyas, and from the sattva in Ahamakara came the ten Devas who are the lords of the senses, and the mind.

I set all these into motion and they merged into the Cosmic Egg, and I dwelt in it, too: it became the sacred abode of my Self that pervades creation.

In the Cosmic Egg afloat upon the cosmic sea, Ekarnava, I manifested as Narayana. The Great Lotus sprang from my navel and within it Brahma, the Creator, was born, of himself, svayambhuva.

Having rajas, and my grace, Brahma performed tapasya, and with the power he gained from it he made all the worlds that exist, which include Bhurloka, Bhuvarloka and Swarloka. He created the Gods that rule the worlds.

The Devas dwell in Swarloka. Bhuvarloka, the ethereal cosmos, is inhabited by the bhutas, spirits. Bhurloka belongs to humans. The worlds that are beyond these are only for the greatest Siddhas, the most evolved souls.

Beneath Bhurloka, or Bhumi, Brahma created the various Patalas for the Asuras and Nagas – realms like Atala, Vitala and the rest. Jivas attain to the worlds of Swar, Bhuvar and Bhur depending on the gunas that dominate their karma.

By yoga, tapasya and sanyasa, souls rise beyond these three realms to the more exalted planes – Maharloka, Janaloka, Tapoloka and Satyaloka. With bhakti the jiva attains my world – Vaikuntha.

I control all the worlds and, bound by their karma, all jivas, from the lowest patala to Brahmaloka, rise and fall in the tide of the gunas of Prakriti.

Purusha and Prakriti are the source of all things, great and small, and the Two permeate creation.

The Pristine Essence, which was before the various mutations began and shall be when they have ended, must surely be present during the processes of change between the beginning and the end of time. Only that Sacred Essence of all things is real and eternal, not the fleeting changes in between – just like golden ornaments and gold, or earthen vessels and the clay of which they are made: the temporary effect and the basic cause.

Reality is the Cause, the eternal Substance from which everything else is fashioned or evolves. This continues to be changeless from the beginning, through all the processes of the universe. Brahman is immutable and remains unchanged even when the universe of effects subsides.

Prakriti is the material substance and cause of this universe of forms. Purusha is the Adhara, the Inner Soul and Master, of Prakriti. Kaala makes the universe manifest from its latent condition. Purusha, Prakriti and Kaala are aspects of me, who am the Parabrahman.

As long as the Lord's creative will sustains the continuum of time as a current of cause and effect, the universe lives, and jivas reap the fruit of their karma, good and bad.

When the Creative Will subsides, the Pralaya arrives. As Mahakaala, I destroy the Cosmic Egg, in which numberless universes are born and decay, and return all things to their pristine, singular and elemental condition: the undivided Brahman.

Body dissolves into food, food into seed, seed into earth, earth into fragrance, scent into water, water into taste, taste into fire, fire into form, form into air, air into touch, touch into sky, and sky into sound.

All the senses are reabsorbed into the Gods that rule them, the Gods into the Universal Mind, which comes from sattva and controls everything.

Sound, sabda, dissolves into the tamasa in Ahamkara, and Ahamkara, cosmic deluder, is absorbed into the Mahatattva.

Mahatattva is absorbed into the three gunas, which are its cause, and the gunas dissolve into Prakriti. Prakriti dissolves into Kaala, which now becomes inert and still.

Time is absorbed into maya and jivas into the Atman. I am the limitless Atman that remains unaffected, unchanging.

No delusion of multiplicity will ever arise in the mind of one that meditates constantly upon this process. Delusion will fly from his heart as darkness does before the sun. Even if, occasionally, it raises its head, it shall never take root in such a tapasvin's heart.

This is the Samkhya Yoga, which severs the knots of doubt that bind the heart. I am He that knows all things, sukshma and sthula, and it is from me that you have heard this transcendent philosophy in the form of a discourse on how the constituents of the universe evolve and dissolve again,' said Sri Krishna."

FREEDOM FROM THE GUNAS

SRI SUKA SAID, "THE LORD SAID:

'Noble friend, let me tell you how the three gunas affect the nature of man, when they are in their pristine state and separate from one another.

Sattva causes self-restraint, of senses and mind, forbearance, discernment, austerity, honesty, compassion, memory, contentment, tranquillity, sacrifice, detachment, the lack of carnal desires, faith, revulsion toward evil, charitableness, and absorption in the Atman.

Rajas is desire, activity, pride, greed, haughtiness, hankering after selfish gain, sensuality, vigour born of excitement, a craving after honour and fame, ridiculing others, showing off and aggressiveness.

Anger, greed, treachery, cruelty, shamelessness, hypocrisy, sloth, quarrelsomeness, depression, delusions, dejection, wretchedness, vain expectations, fear, inertia, laziness – these are the signs of tamas.

This is how the traiguna affect men when they function individually. Listen to the effects the gunas produce when they combine.

Uddhava, the sense of I and mine are produced by the gunas combining. The three gunas in combination create all the functions of the mind, the tanmatras, the senses and prana.

When a man resolutely pursues dharma, artha and kama, he becomes earnest, attached, acquisitive and pleasure loving; here, too, the gunas combine.

In a grihasta, even the performance of his swadharma arises from the gunas combining. His resolve to perform his dharma is sattvik, his pursuit of satisfying his desires is rajasic, and his attachment toward his home and his family is tamasic.

If you see a calm man, possessed of the other noble qualities, you can assume that sattva dominates his nature. If a man is full of restless desire, be sure that rajas rules him and if anger is his main quality, tamas has sway over his life.

If you find a person that relinquishes selfish desire and worships me with bhakti, performing his dharma with purity of heart, you know that such a one is predominantly sattvik.

When you see someone who worships me by doing his dharma and also fulfilling his many desires thereby, he has a rajasic character. He that is always trying to destroy his enemies is a man of tamas.

Sattva, rajas and tamas manifest in the mind and bind the jiva. They do not touch me, for I am the Lord of all things. They do not bind or affect even jivas who have vairagya, and who do not identify themselves with the body or bear any attachment for material possessions.

Sattva is bright, tranquil and pure; when sattva dominates the other two gunas in a man, he is happy, full of dharma and gyana.

Attachment, a sense of divisions and differences, and a consciousness of power are the signs of rajas. When rajas rules over sattva and tamas, the man suffers because he walks the way of karma prompted by desire, and relentlessly seeks wealth and fame.

Tamas knows no discrimination. Sloth, stupor and inertness characterise tamas. The tamasic man is a pessimist; he is deluded, subject to vain fantasies, lazy, cruel and self-indulgent.

When the mind is calm and the senses are reposed, when the body is free from sickness and danger, and the heart from attachments, Uddhava, know that sattva rules – the guna through which I manifest in the jiva.

When there is frenetic activity and a man is an incorrigible extravert, when his mind and senses are always restless, when he falls sick frequently both in body and mind, when he experiences confusion, know that rajas dominates.

When the mind droops, barely conscious, frequently dissolving into sleep, when the faculty of the intellect scarcely functions because of pessimism, then know that tamas prevails.

When sattva rules the power of introspection, power that belongs to the Devas, swells. When rajas dominates, the asuric power of action rules a man, when during the phases of tamas the deluded ways of the rakshasas govern a man.

The state of waking belongs to sattva, the state of dreams to rajas, and that of sleep to tamas. The condition known as Turiya, the Fourth, is the Spirit: it permeates the gunas and is beyond the gunas.

Brahmanas that observe the sattvik way rise up to Swarga. Men that keep to tamas devolve to the lower realms and species, in the narakas, and men of rajas find this intermediate world, Bhumi, for themselves.

Those that die when sattva prevails find Swarga; men that die when rajas dominates find Bhumi and if a man dies when he is full of tamas he is cast down into naraka. But if a man has passed beyond the influence of the gunas, he comes to me.

Nishkama karma, or swadharma performed as an offering to me is sattvik. Karma undertaken out of the desire for the fruit of karma is rajasik, and karma that involves cruelty and brutality is tamasik.

Sattva illumines the knowledge of the Atman as being entirely apart from and unconnected to the body. Rajas sees the Atman as occupying the body, while tamas identifies the body with the Atman. This last misperception is common in people steeped in avidya and in children. The gyana of enlightenment, which knows me, is beyond the three gunas.

Living a solitary life in a forest is sattvik; living in a town or village is rajasik; spending one's time in a gambling house is tamasik. My tirthas in the world are beyond the scope of the gunas.

He that works with no attachment to the fruit of his karma is sattvik. The man blinded by attachment is rajasik, and the deluded man, tamasik. My bhakta, who surrenders to me, is beyond the three gunas.

Faith in God is sattvik, belief in karma is rasajik, while to walk the way of sin and evil is tamasik. However, he that serves me is beyond the gunas of Prakriti.

Food that is pure, healthgiving and easily obtained is sattvik. Food that is pleasurable to the palate is rajasic, while unhealthy, unclean food is tamasik. Food consumed after being offered to me, as my leavings, is beyond the gunas.

The happiness that comes from dhyana is sattvik, the pleasure that comes from the senses is rajasic, while that which is born of vices like drinking and dependence on others is tamasic. The joy that comes from being devoted to me transcends the gunas.

Substantiality, country, the fruit of action, time, knowledge, karma and the doer, sraddha, the three states of waking, sleep and dream, the forms of beings like Devas and men – all these depend upon the three gunas.

Purusharishabha, O bull among men, all that exists, which is seen, heard and conceived as being manifest in Purusha and Prakriti is, in fact, based in the three gunas.

The jiva transmigrates, over and over, according to the gunas with which it associates and the karma that accrues from these. The man who passes beyond the influences of the gunas in his mind comes to me, with bhakti. He is united with me, and, indeed, he becomes me.

Intelligent men, who have found a human birth, which is the vehicle for moksha, renounce attachment to the mundane material life, and adore me and me alone. The man of discernment worships me. He controls his senses, practises vairagya and, with great rigor, strives for the ultimate spiritual goal, the final meaning of all life.

Yogis cultivate the sattva guna by eating only pure food and exposing themselves only to pure sense impressions. Using the sattva guna, the Sage subdues tamas and rajas. Then, he cleanses his mind of desire, makes it perfectly serene and unites it with the Godhead. Thus, he subdues sattva also and his mind dissolves into its original cause, the Atman.

The jiva abandons the subtle body, the sukshma sarira, escapes from the gunas of Prakriti and attains to me. I fill the jiva that has been liberated from ahamkara and even the subtlest contents of the mind. I am the immaculate Brahman and seek no fulfilment either from within or without,' said Krishna to Uddhava."

ON AVOIDING EVIL COMPANY

SRI SUKA SAID, "SRI BHAGAVAN SAID:

'The human body is the craft in which to realise me. Once you find me and serve me, you will attain the Brahman, the final ecstasy, He that abides within you as the Antaryamin.

He that has found the Atman, and thus been set free from ahamkara, from identifying himself with the body and the mind, may yet live in the world of the gunas, until his body is alive. But the objects of samsara no longer delude or bind him, despite his body being in their midst.

A seeker does not befriend men whose only aim is to satisfy hunger and lust. He that follows such men is doomed to the turgid darkness of avidya, just as a blind man being led by another will become lost.

When the emperor Pururavas recovered from the terrible dejection that seized him when the Apsara Urvashi left him, a wonderful dispassion dawned over his spirit. He composed a poem.

When he saw Urvashi leaving him, the king ran after her, naked, like a madman. Sobbing, he begged her, "Ah hard-hearted one, don't leave me!"

His passion for her was not sated and his mind was lost in her. He had forgotten that a long time had elapsed in her company and that his life still lay ahead of him.

However, when he recovered his poise, Pururavas, who was also Aila, said: "How powerful was the lust that ruled my soul all this while! I lay in Urvashi's arms and lost count of the days and nights that sped by.

She stole my heart and I did not know when the sun rose or set. I lost track of the years, the countless years, that passed while I was with her.

I am meant to be the crown jewel of the kshatriyas, why a great Chakravarti, but I became no more than a woman's lapdog.

She left me as if I, with all the power and wealth of an emperor, was a mere blade of grass, and I ran naked and howling after her like a lunatic.

Where was all my majesty when I chased after her like a jackass after its female, enduring the kicks she delivered?

Of what use are vidya, tapasya, tyaga, Vedic sruta, vivikta and mowna, if a woman can still steal one's heart away at her whim?

I was proud of my sovereignty and my learning, and I was a fool who knew little of what was good for me. I was scarcely better than an ass or a bull in rut, at the mercy of the female.

Long years I drank the honey from Urvashi's lips and I was not satisfied but thirsted for more. I was like the fire that is fed with ghee.

Ah, the Lord Mahavishnu is beyond the senses but he can rule the minds of even Rishis plunged in the bliss of the Atman. Only he can free me from the bondage of this nymph, this harlot.

Irresistible fascination has gripped my heart. Urvashi gave me wise counsel that I was a slave to my lust.

In truth she did me no harm. Having no control over my senses, I am my own enemy. When a man mistakes a rope for a snake, the fault does not lie with the rope but with the man.

Where this filthy, stinking body and where the great beauty and divine qualities one associates with it? It is only the mind's ignorant fantasy, its foolish delusion to find beauty in something as wretched as the body.

Whose is this body, after all? Does it belong to one's parents because it came from them? Does it belong to one's wife because she enjoys it and is protected by it? Does it belong to a man's master because he serves him with it? Does it belong to the fire because it is to fire that the body is finally consigned? Or to the dogs and vultures for it provides them with food, or to a man's friends who expect every manner of help from his body?

A woman's body is a vile and filthy thing. And to that body, which becomes ashes or worm food one day, a man becomes passionately attached. The besotted fool goes about singing her praises: 'Ah, such a beautiful face, such a charming smile!'

Where is the difference between us and the worms, when we both seek joy in a body made of skin, flesh, fat, marrow, bone, and filled with excrement and urine?

By analysing it, a man can surely know how foolish and empty physical attraction is. Yet the tapasvin should shun the company of women and that of men who are enslaved by women. For it is when the senses and their objects of gratification come into mutual contact that the mind becomes agitated by lust.

The mind is not attracted to objects of desire that it has never seen. The mind of a man who keeps himself and his senses from such contact gradually finds repose and calm.

You should not keep the company of women or men that are involved with women. Even the most discerning man cannot trust his senses to withstand temptation; what then, to say of ignorant men?"

Singing these thoughts, Pururavas, honoured among men and the Devas, left the world of Urvashi. He attained to me, the Brahman, and found peace.

So, a wise man should renounce the company of those that are sensual and seek the company of Sages. For, by their presence and counsel, the holy ones remove the sensuality in men.

A Saint he is that depends only upon me, who is absorbed always in me, who is serene, even-minded and without any ego, who is beyond all the pairs of opposites, and who does not care for gifts or wealth.

Noble Uddhava, such men always speak of me, and relate my legends, and these have a deeply benign influence. Those that listen to them are relieved of the burden of their sins.

Men that hear such sacred lore often give praise in songs and poems. They experience spiritual delight and develop profound bhakti. They meditate upon me and also serve me.

My devout friend, nothing remains for such a man to attain, who has found bhakti for me, the Brahman, the infinite field of Satchitananda.

Just as he that goes near a fire rids himself of cold, darkness and fear, the company of Sages rids a man of the cold of ritualism, the darkness of avidya and the terror of samsara.

As a stout lifeboat is to the shipwrecked, so, too, is the refuge of the Rishis of Brahman to those that flounder in the terrible sea of samsara.

The Saints are your only sanctuary in this world – they are as food to the living, as I am to the distressed, as dharma is a man's only wealth after he is dead.

The Saint can open your inner eye, which sees God in his transcendence and his immanence. The Sage is the Devata; he is the true kinsman. The Saint is the Atman; why, he is me.

When Pururavas overcame his passion for Urvashi, he lost all desire and attachment for things worldly. He ranged the Earth a free man, with his heart plunged in the bliss of the Atman,' Sri Bhagavan said,"

Says Sri Suka.

KRIYA YOGA, THE RITES OF DEVOTION

"UDDHAVA SAID, 'MY LORD, TELL ME ABOUT KRIYA YOGA, THE RITUAL way to communion, which the Sattvatas follow, Sattvatarishabha.

Great Munis like Narada, Vyasa and the Devacharya, Brihaspati son of Angiras, praise this means towards communion as being most excellent for men.

You first revealed the Kriya Yoga and Brahma taught it to Bhrigu and his other sons. Siva revealed it to Parvati.

All varnas and asramas can tread the way of Kriya Yoga. For women and for sudras this is the most efficacious path.

Lotus-eyed Krishna, Lord of the universe, I am your loving bhakta who beg you: tell me about the Kriya Yoga by which I can undo the bonds of karma.'

Sri Bhagavan said, 'The karma kanda is limitless, but I will tell you briefly what it is, in its proper order.

My ritual worship has three forms: rites based on the Vedas, those found in the Tantras and those that are a mixture of both. A seeker can worship me by any of these, the way he best likes.

Let me tell you how, once they have their upanayanams done, the members of the three varnas, the dvijas, worship me with faith and bhakti.

I am God, the final Acharya, and a bhakta adores me with offerings, as image, as a mystic yantra drawn on the floor, in the sun, in water, as a Sage, or in his own heart.

Rising early, the worshipper cleans his teeth, bathes, while uttering mantras from the Vedas and Tantras, rubbing his body with mud or other cleansing materials.

He performs sandhya vandana and other rituals prescribed in the Veda, with fervent bhakti, and this shall free him from the bondage of karma.

My idols and images are of eight kinds – stone, wooden, metallic, those made of clay or sand, those made from precious gemstones, mystic yantras drawn on the ground, pictures, and images conceived in the mind.

These sacred images are tabernacles of the Brahman and they are of two kinds: the fixed and those that can be moved. Uddhava, there is no need to invoke the Lord in the fixed idols, for he dwells in them always.

In some moveable icons, too, as in the Saligrama, there is no need to summon the Lord's presence with mantras and other rites. But in images of earth and sand, He must be invoked. You must bathe before worshipping six of the above images. To worship pictures and idols of sand, cleaning yourself suffices.

If a man worships me to have his desires fulfilled, then he should make choice offerings to my idol. The bhakta that adores me without any desire may offer anything he finds. Of course, offerings made to the idol of the imagination are imaginary, as well, and of the mind.

Uddhava, the fixed idols must be properly adorned and the bhakta must bathe before worshipping them. In yantras drawn on the floor, it is vital that the various Deities are located in their proper places, with the apposite mantras. Ghee is the crucial ingredient for worship offered into Agni.

When the Sun is worshipped, the offerings are a prayer and a hymn of praise. When adoration is offered to Water, as in a river, a lake or the sea, it takes the form of libation, tarpana.

However, the most important ingredient of ritual worship is sraddha, faith. Let a bhakta offer me just some water with devotion and I receive it with joy; what shall I say, then, about offerings of flowers, incense, sandalwood paste and food? But any offering, however sumptuous, does not please me when it is made without bhakti.

The worshipper collects whatever he needs for the ritual worship, then he bathes and sits upon a darbhasana, facing either east or north. If he is worshipping a fixed idol he must sit facing the image.

He performs nyaasa, a ceremonial locating, of the idol and himself, and washes it with his hands. He keeps a purnakumbha, a vessel full of holy water and another for prokshana, sprinkling water; these are consecrated with flowers, sandalwood paste, rice grains and other ingredients.

He sprinkles water from the prokshana vessel over the place of worship, the ingredients and offerings, and himself. He fills three other vessels with water from the purnakumbha, for padya and the other rituals. In these he places the flowers, the sandalwood paste and the other offerings, in order to purify the water.

With his Guru's blessings and instruction, he sanctifies the three vessels for padya, arghya and achamana with three mantras – *hridayaya namah, seershne swaaha,* and *sikhaayaa vashat.* He also blesses all the vessels with the Gayatri mantra.

In the lotus of the heart, blown upon by prana, burnt pure by the fire from the muladhara and soaked in the amrita from the sphere of the moon in the forehead, I dwell, transcendent, in a form upon which Siddhas meditate.

When the body is filled by that Presence, through dhyana, then worship that Form in the heart. The worshipper identifies himself with God, and in that communion the Holy Spirit is transferred into the idol. The bhakta then adores the living idol with the proper rituals.

A throne is created infused with Dharma and the other divinities, the nine mystic powers. Upon that, the bhakta visualises a luminous lotus with eight petals, pericarp and filaments. Within this lotus, he imagines the sun, moon and fire, lustrous, and one above the other.

He worships me within this lotus, chanting mantras from the Vedas and the Tantras. He offers me padya, arghya, achamana, and prayers for his material progress and spiritual liberation.

He worships the Sudarshana, Panchajanya, Kaumodaki, the sword Nandaka, Saringa, the Kaustubha, Vanamala and the Srivatsa.

He conceives the Lord's servitors stationed in the eight directions, and worships them. He sees Garuda in front of him, and Nanda, Sunanda, Prachanda, Chanda, Mahaabala, Bala, Kumuda and Kumudaksha all around.

He imagines Durga, Ganapathy, Vyasa and Vishvaksena in the four quarters, the Gurus on his left and the Devatas in the east. All these are seen to face the Lord before him, and the seeker adores them with arghya and other offerings.

If he can afford it, the worshipper must bathe the image in water sanctified by mantras and perfumed with sandalwood, useera, camphor, saffron and aloe.

He worships me, devoutly, with the sacred mantras Suvarna, Gharma and Parivedana, chanting *Jitam te pundareekaaksha, Namaste Viswabhavana Subrahmanya namastestu mahapurusha purvaja.* He recites the Purushasukta and chants the Samans, such as *Indram naro nemadhitaa havante.*

With fervour, the bhakta then adorns my image with clothes, ornaments, garlands, sandalwood paste and other anointments.

With deep faith, he offers me water for padya, arghya and achamanya. He offers me sandalwood paste, flowers, rice grains, waves lamps before me, incense, and offers food.

The man that can afford it makes offerings of delicacies – gur-payasam, sweet cakes, savouries, wheat boiled in milk, curd and more.

On festival days, or if the means exist, every day, the worship is performed elaborately with oil baths for the idol, a bath in panchamrita, feasts, offerings of mirrors, song and dance.

The sacrificial pit is created according to the scriptures: its different zones, the fire-pit and the altar. Then the fire is lit with the wood stacked expertly to form a single flame.

The fire is surrounded by darbha grass and holy water sprinkled. Then, in anvadhaana all the offerings are placed to the north of the agnikunda. After prokshana, the worshipper fixes his mind on me as being manifest in the flames.

He sees me as bright as molten gold, four-armed, the hands holding sankha, chakra, gada and kamala. He sees me as being perfectly calm, clad in a pitambara robe, the colour of the pistil of a lotus.

He sees me as wearing scintillating ornaments: a crown, bracelets, a girdle and armlets. He sees the Srivatsa upon my breast and the Kaustubha ruby bloodred beside it. He sees the vanamala that I wear.

Visualising me thus, the wise one adores me. He soaks twelve twigs in ghee and offers them in the fire. He performs the aghara ritual, beginning with the mantra *Prajapataye svaha.* He continues with the Ajyabhaga ritual with the mantra *Agnaye svaha.*

Offering oblations to the fire, he utters the Mulamantra and the Purushasukta, making an offering to the agni after each of the sixteen Riks.

He offers oblation to Dharma, chanting the proper mantras and worships Agni Deva with the Svishtakrita offering.

Then, he makes offerings of flowers and sashtanga namaskaras to me, manifest in the midst of the blazing fire. On eight sides, food is offered to my servitors and companions. Then he sits again upon the darbhasana of the worshipper and meditates upon me, the Brahman, as Narayana. As japa, he chants the Mulamantra.

He imagines the Deity as having finished the meal that was offered to Him, then offers water for the God to wash, then betel leaves with which to refresh his mouth. Once more, he offers flowers as worship. What remains of the food is given to Viswaksena.

When this is over, the bhakta relaxes himself, in some bliss – singing my legends, acting them out, dancing them and also relating my Purana to other bhaktas.

He loudly sings Sanskrit hymns composed by Seers of yore, as well as later songs of adoration composed by Mahatmas of more recent days, in newer languages. Then he falls like a stick in stiff prostration, crying, “Lord, bless me!”

He sets his head at my feet, clasping them with both hands. Fervidly, he prays, “I, your servant, seek shelter at your blessed feet from fear of the sea of samsara in which the crocodile Death swims. Lord, give me refuge!”

Now he imagines that I am giving him flowers, sandalwood paste and other auspicious prasada. He sets these reverently upon his head. Now, if he has invoked the Divine Presence himself, he must withdraw it again, back into the Brahman within.

I am the essence and the soul of everything. I am present everywhere and in everyone. You can worship me in any object or icon, which stirs your faith at a given time. Bhakti is the key ingredient in any worship, and its effectiveness.

The bhakta that worships by these kriyas of the Vedas and the Tantras will find weal, in this world and the next. For, he shall find my grace.

The bhakta that can afford to do so should build temples to me and install my idols within. He should surround these with lavish gardens of flowers and trees, and make endowments in my name, of arable land, bazaars, houses, villages: all to be used for my uninterrupted worship, either on days of festivals or daily. By such dharma, he seeks to attain to my Being.

By installing an idol of me a man can become an emperor, while by building a great temple to me, he can become master of the three worlds. By further worshipping me in that temple, he can attain to Brahmaloka, and by doing all the three, he can attain union with me.

The way of attaining to my Being is to worship me with no desire. The man who worships me with Kriya Yoga finds the condition in which there is no desire, and in which true bhakti grows.

He that steals wealth given to serve the Lord or his holy men shall become a worm and live off excrement for countless years. The same shall be the fate of anyone that abets such theft. The more involved the accomplice is, the more dreadful will be the retribution,' said Sri Krishna, the Lord."

GYANA YOGA, THE WAY OF KNOWLEDGE

SRI SUKA SAID, "SRI BHAGAVAN CONTINUED:

'You must see the world as being one, its source the union of Prakriti and Purusha. So, it is meaningless to blame or praise anyone for their nature or what they do.

He that praises or judges the character and deeds of other men quickly loses touch with his goal Sat, the true and single Consciousness. For, his mind is swayed by asat, what is neither true nor in the least permanent.

When the senses, which the taijasahamkara creates, fall into sleep, the jiva dreams. When the mind sinks into the deepest sleep, that state is like death itself. With regard to his spirit, the man who perceives multiplicity is like one that is in the deepest sleep, or even dead.

Good and evil are ultimately meaningless. Nothing that is described by words, experienced by the senses and the mind has any reality.

Though illusory, the idea of a rope being a snake does stir some emotion. The fear caused by identifying the Atman with the body and the mind is similar, and dispelled by the light of moksha.

The world is nothing but the Atman. That all-powerful Being is the Creator and the created. He alone is the saved and the Saviour. He is Destroyer and the destroyed.

And so the great Munis accept no reality except the Atman, transcendent and immutable. He, the Primal Cause, shimmers as the many. The triune appearance of the universe – adhyatmika, adhidaivika and adhibhautika – is only an illusion created by the Atman. This samsara of the three gunas is just his maya.

He that realises what I have told you will never praise or insult anyone. He goes abroad like the very sun, unattached, unconcerned by all that is high and all that is low.

The seeker strives to cultivate detachment by observation, by analysis, by experience and understanding, and by studying the scriptures. He knows that everything that has a beginning and an end is not real, but asat, unreal.'

Uddhava said, 'My Lord, the body cannot transmigrate because it is sthula and itself an object of perception. The Atman does not transmigrate, either, for He is pure consciousness and the Subject that illumines all things. Samsara happens neither to the body nor to the Atman; yet happen it does, as we observe.

The Atman does not age or decay. It is passionless, unaffected by paapa and punya, untainted by avidya, and free from the bounds of space and time. By comparison the body is a log of dead wood. Then who is subject to samsara, who is born, lives and dies, again and again?'

Sri Krishna Bhagavan said, 'As long as the Atman is connected to the intellect, the senses, prana and the body, the one without discernment experiences samsara.

In a dream, the dreamer sees phantom-like images of his waking world. So, too, though samsara does not really exist, it appears to be real to a deluded man.

Once the sleeper awakens, his dream dissolves, and the emotions it evoked, though some memory of it might remain.

Sorrow, joy, fear, anger, greed, illusion, desire of every kind, as well as the experiences called birth and death belong to the ahamkara and not to the Atman. In deep sleep, where the ahamkara does not function, none of these exist.

Not merely the ahamkara, but the jiva is involved in samsara and the wheel of transmigration. And the jiva is the Atman, identifying with the body, the senses, the mind and prana. Called Sutratma and Mahatattva, he is ruled by Kaala, great time.

The Muni sharpens the sword of discernment by serving his Guru and God. He then goes forth, severing the knots of ahamkara. For, though it does indeed manifest variously in the mind, in speech, the pranas, the body, and in karma, fundamentally the ego is unreal.

Discernment is called viveka, the true gyana. Viveka evolves through studying the scriptures, by tapasya, by observing tradition, by reason and by experience. The single goal of gyana and viveka is to realise that God existed before this universe and will continue to exist when the universe has ceased to be, and he also exists while the universe does. He is the universe and Time, the power by which it manifests.

As gold exists before it is fashioned into ornaments and, again, after the ornaments are melted down, and also as the ornaments, I appear as this multifarious and everchanging universe. But I also exist, immaculately, before, during and after the appearance and life of the universe.

Uddhava, pure consciousness, Vigyana, permeates the three states of consciousness: waking, sleeping, and dreaming. It animates the three gunas of Prakriti that are the basis of the three conditions, and also the universe of cause, effect and agency. As the fourth state, the Turiya, Consciousness is the eternal and transcendent Truth.

Anything that did not exist before its origin and ceases to be after its dissolution cannot be termed as being real; indeed, it has no basis in reality but only illusion. Only the primal, eternal substance of which the universe is created can be said to be real. This is what I say.

The teeming world, a projection of rajas, had no existence before it was created; yet, it is experienced for a time as existing. This is because the Brahman, Un-born, Self-luminous, illumines the senses, the mind, the five elements and the worlds that these reveal.

Use the wisdom of the Veda and of your own reason, and withdraw from the objects of the senses and their lusts. Cut away your doubts about His existence, destroy the delusion that you are the body, and establish yourself in the bliss of the Atman.

For the body is certainly not the Atman, nor are the senses, their deities, prana, buddhi, chitta or ahamkara. The five elements and what they create cannot be the Un-born Self, for, finally, they are all inert without the Spirit that breathes life into them and makes them conscious.

The vagaries of the restrained or of the uncontrolled senses are inconsequential to him that has realised my Being: just as clouds that gather or scatter in the sky do not affect the sun.

Air, fire, water and earth do not dry, burn, wet or sully the sky. The seasons do not affect the akasa. The gunas of Prakriti, which enmesh the jiva in samsara, do not touch the Atman.

However, the seeker should not let this final truth weaken his efforts at restraint. He should guard himself strenuously against becoming attached to the objects of sensual pleasure, the creations of maya.

A disease that is not fully cured lies dormant in the body and surfaces from time to time to trouble the patient. So, too, the sensuality of the immature yogi, who has not truly conquered his desires, lies in wait to ambush him.

The Devas set temptation in the path of yogis that are not full-grown – friends, relatives and other human agents – and they fall temporarily. However, in their next lives, they return to tread the path more firmly. They will never become addicted to the worldly life again.

Driven by desire, in its many forms, an ignorant jiva persists with karma of every kind until his body dies. The enlightened man, though he inhabits a body, is beyond desire because he is plunged in the immortal bliss of the Atman. He acts, but his karma never binds him.

Even while he eats, sleeps, sits, stands, walks, excretes, and all the rest, the Sage of illumination abides in his Atman. He has no consciousness of his body, much less what it does.

He might be conscious of the objects contained in the world of samsara, but he sees them for the dreams and illusions they are. He sees through them.

Uddhava, avidya projects the delusion of identifying the body wrought from the gunas of Prakriti and from karma with the Atman. When the light of gyana dispels avidya, this delusion is dispelled. The Atman always remains transcendent. It finds neither bondage nor moksha from bondage.

Night cloaks the world in darkness. When the sun rises, he lights up the world. However the world existed even during the night. The Atman shines eternally, but is briefly mantled by the night of avidya. Nothing that is new is created by a jiva's liberation.

The Atman is Un-born, fathomless, Self-illumined Consciousness and Bliss. He includes every other focus of consciousness within himself, and all their experiences. He is the Absolute, with no second. The seeker finds Him by intuition, when thought and words cease, although it is He that makes the vital breath and speech possible.

Only the Atman exists. The mind's delusions see the world of the many: the Atman is the sole foundation for all those many, their only reality and essence.

Only arrogant scholars, with vested interests, consider the myriad universe, divided by names and forms and made of the elements as being final reality. They claim that the passages in the Veda that tell of the Atman are merely indirect hymns to the Devas and their agents, and the other participants in a Vedic ritual. They do not speak the truth.

Yogis, who have not yet found the Truth, might suffer from physical ailments. Here are some ways in which to counter these.

Fevers caused by heat and cold can be cured by concentrating upon the moon and the sun, respectively. The sicknesses produced by vata can be cured by yogasanas combined with dharana, concentration of the mind. Diseases that arise from sin, planetary influences, and serpentine afflictions are to be quelled by tapasya, mantras and aushadhis.

Fight lust and anger by listening to my Purana, by hymning me and thinking of me. Overcome pride, hypocrisy and other character defects by serving great men.

Some Yogis use these methods to strengthen their bodies, make them young, and then acquire siddhis, psychic powers.

The Rishis do not approve of this. The body is like a fruit, and subject to decay and death. To attempt to preserve it interminably is a vain effort.

The Yogi might well enjoy robust health. However, the intelligent bhakta thinks of me as being his single spiritual goal; he does not allow the acquisition of bodily strength and occult siddhis to distract him from his goal.

The devotee that treads the path of Yoga, with no lesser desire, and surrenders to me absolutely, meets no obstacle and the bliss of the Atman fills him,' Sri Krishna said."

KRISHNA'S LAST TEACHING TO UDDHAVA

SRI SUKA SAID, "UDDHAVA SAID:

'Lord, He that has not vanquished his senses will find the gyana marga you describe difficult to follow. Achyuta, tell me, in words that I can easily understand, another way for an ordinary man to seek communion with you.

Lotus-eyed Krishna, Yogis often exhaust themselves by the practice of their Yoga. They do not attain the final end and become frustrated.

So, men of discernment do not tread these rigorous paths, but seek sanctuary, instead, at your feet that flow amrita, and there find peace. The rest, deluded by your maya, believing too much in their own ability, walk the ways of Yoga and karma.

Achyuta, friend to all, even Brahma bends his crown at your feet. Yet, despite your awesome glory, you sought the friendship of vanaras, animals of the forest, when you came as Rama. In this life, as Krishna, you grew among the humble gopas and cows, loving them. Why should one wonder that you give yourself to your bhaktas, whose only refuge you are?

Who, knowing the nature of your boundless grace, will not long to be your servant? You are the soul of all beings, the most adorable one, who answers every prayer. Who will seek Swarga and its pleasures, though these too are yours to give, when they can serve you instead? For Heaven and its felicities make a man forget you.

Brahma has served you in joy for two Paraardhas of creation. He can scarcely repay in smallest part what he owes you – the gift of your pervading the universe as the inner and outward Guru, who effaces evil from the jiva and reveals his true nature: of the immortal Atman.'

At Uddhava's question, full of love, a brilliant smile lit the face of Krishna, the Brahman who manifests as the Trimurti, and plays with the universe as with a toy.

Sri Bhagavan said, 'Listen, then, to the dharma of glory that I have brought. For if a man follows it with bhakti he shall conquer samsara, which is, otherwise, well nigh impossible to subdue.

Think of me always, consciously, and deep in your heart, subconsciously; believe in my Bhagavata Dharma, and offer all your life and karma to me.

The seeker should visit the tirthas, sanctified because my greatest bhaktas lived where they are. The aspirant emulates the lives of the great bhaktas – among the Devas, among Asuras and men.

Alone or with other devotees, he observes the days that are scared to me – celebrating these with music, dance, processions and the display of royal emblems like the white parasol.

The pure-hearted bhakta sees me everywhere, pervading the universe and himself, as the akasa does: untrammelled, unhindered.

O Uddhava of mighty intellect, know the true pandita, the illumined man, to be the one that sees all beings as my manifestations, and is even-minded to them all.

He sees brahmana and pulaya outcaste as being equal, and being me. He sees cruel men and kind, the sun and the spark of fire, the calm man and the wild and ferocious one equally, and makes no distinction between them.

He that constantly seeks my presence in every human being ceases to compete with his equals, to envy his superiors, to be contemptuous toward his inferiors, and, in general, to be self-conscious or self-regarding.

He ignores the ridicule of friends and relatives, does not see anyone as being great or small, but worships every being, seeing just me in them all and prostrating before them like a piece of wood. He worships a dog, an outcaste, a cow, or a mule as a manifestation of the Brahman!

Until he finds this exalted state, the seeker worships me by more ordinary means, by thought, word and deed.

Gradually, he trains himself to see the Atman everywhere, and gains the knowledge where he sees nothing but the Brahman and knows no other presence. His doubts all melt; and he leaves karma behind him, and becomes free.

This, I tell you, is the highest Yoga: to find me everywhere, in all things and beings, and to adore me with thought, word and deed.

When you live the Bhagavata Dharma without any desire for its fruit, Uddhava, everything you do becomes sacred. No thought, word or action is wasted, for they are spiritual now, immortal, and shall lead to the seeker's evolution, in this life or the next. I, the Brahman, have ordained this.

Noble one, if you surrender your life to me, the most mundane acts – say, running in fear, or crying from sorrow – all become sacred and spiritually potent. What then shall I say of the Bhagavata Dharma?

Using this paltry mortal body to attain to me, who are the Undying Truth, is the highest wisdom of the wise and the finest skill of the skilful.

This, then, is the essence and the expatiation of the doctrine of the Brahman as found in the Veda. Why, my friend, the Devas have not heard this directly from me!

You have heard, repeatedly, the highest spiritual teaching, illumined by the light of reason. Your doubts shall dissolve and you will come to moksha.

In times to come, even he that listens to an account of the questions you asked me and the answers I gave shall find the Brahman, of whom the Veda tells.

As for the holy man that preaches this dharma among my bhaktas, why, he shall have my own Self, from my love for him.

He that reads this discourse aloud shall, in truth, be revealing me to anyone that hears him. He shall light the lamp of their wisdom, and bless them and himself.

The man that hears this Uddhava Gita every day, with bhakti toward me, shall be freed from the bonds of karma.

Uddhava, precious friend, have you understood fully the Truth that I have explained? Is your mind free, now, from sorrow and delusion?

But never reveal this to a hypocrite, who has no faith, to an atheist, to a cunning man, to a man that does not like to hear it, or to the man that has no trace of bhakti.

To anyone else, you can relate what I have told you: especially to men who love Sages and who love me, to men of moral rectitude, to men who live pure lives. If a man of low birth possesses bhakti, he, too, may receive this teaching.

Just as after drinking amrita, there is no superior drink to be had, there is no higher teaching to look for or to know, after a seeker hears this one.

For a noble bhakta like you, I am the four final values – gyana, karma, yoga and moksha, as well.

When a man renounces selfish karma and surrenders to me, he becomes dear indeed to me. He comes to realise that he is the Atman and becomes fit to be united with the Immortal Brahman.'

Uddhava stood absorbed by the path of the seeker that Krishna revealed, the path that would lead to mukti. Mighty emotion, vast love, overwhelmed him, and he could not speak, while tears streamed down his face.

Divine love surged, an ocean in his heart, the blessing of dark Krishna before him. Seized by sublime ecstasy, Uddhava folded his hands to the Lord of the Yadavas and laid his head at Krishna's lotus feet.

Said Uddhava, 'O Thou who are more ancient than Brahma! Being near you scatters all of my ignorance and delusion. I seek shelter at your feet. Ah, Krishna, cold, darkness and fear lay no hand upon the man who sits near a blazing fire.

Yet, you have taken it upon yourself to expatiate on this lofty path of knowledge and light. Only the lowest ingrate and fool would dream of deserting a master as loving as you to seek another.

You have severed the bonds of attachment, with which your own Yogamaya bound my heart, for your sublime purpose: the powerful fetters of love for our clans, the Vrishnis, Dasarhas, Andhakas, Sattvatas and the rest. You have cut those knots away with the sword of Atma gyana.

I salute you, Mahayogin, who bestow the fruit of their Yoga to Munis. Ah bless me, Krishna, who seek refuge only in you, that my bhakti for your holy feet never wavers!'

Sri Bhagavan said, 'Uddhava, go now to the tirtha called Badarikasrama, which I have sanctified with my presence. The river Alakananda flows there, the very sight of which will purify you. Perform achamana with its waters that flow from my feet and all your sins will dissolve.

Wear valkala, eat only roots and fruit, free yourself from every desire for pleasure, endure the extreme weather, and be prepared to calmly face whatever fate brings you.

Be restrained, serene, cheerful, and meditate in solitude upon what I have taught you with a mind focused in dhyana. Experience and knowledge you already possess: let these also guide you.

Absorb your thought and your speech in me; live the dharma I have taught you. You will rise beyond all the material and other worlds, and attain to my transcendent, eternal Being.'

Uddhava walked around Krishna, whose memory is the only cure for the sickness of samsara, in pradakshina, and laid his head at the Lord's feet. Uddhava's mind had passed beyond the three gunas, yet at the thought of leaving Krishna and going away to Badari, his tears flowed, bathing Krishna's feet.

Uddhava found he could not tear himself away from Krishna and begin his journey for Badarikasrama. Then, Krishna gave him his sandals, and, finally, placing these upon his head, Uddhava wrenched himself from the Lord's presence and set out for the tirtha upon the mountain.

As he went toward Vishala, he felt Krishna nearer him than ever, lodged deeply in his heart. At Badari, Uddhava lived the life Krishna, friend of the universe, had told him to, and soon he attained complete union with Hari.

This is the gyanamrita that Krishna, whose feet the Mahayogis worship, gave his bhakta Uddhava; this is the perfect knowledge that the Lord distilled from the froth of the ocean of bliss. He that drinks this nectar, with faith, will save not just his own soul but all that associate with him: so potent is this nectarine wisdom.

To relieve his bhaktas from the fear of old age and of death, Krishna, Great Being, from whom the Veda came, collected from the sprawling Vedic garden this concentrated honey of wisdom and awareness of the Brahman. Just as he drew out the amrita of immortality from the Kshirasagara for the Devas, he gave his devotees this Uddhava Gita, so they might find their way out of grief.

Ah, I salute that Bull among men, Krishna, greatest of all beings!" said Sri Suka to the Raja Parikshit.

THE END OF THE YADAVAS

THE KING SAID, "AFTER UDDHAVA LEFT, WHAT DID KRISHNA, CAUSE OF every cause, do in Dwaraka?

The Rishis had cursed Yadavas to become extinct. How did Krishna leave his perfect form that would enthral all men who saw him?

When women saw that form, they could never take their eyes off him. Bhaktas who heard his peerless voice found it graven upon their hearts forever. Poets that wrote about his form found wide and immortal fame.

During the Great War, kshatriyas who saw that form at Arjuna's chariothead, as they died, attained union with him."

Sri Suka replied, "Krishna saw the dire omens on the ground, in the sky and in between. He spoke to the Yadavas in their sabha, the Sudharma. In his heart, he clearly knew what the inexorable future held for them all.

Sri Bhagavan said, 'Yadupumgavas, Yadava chieftains, we see dreadful portents everywhere in Dwaraka, omens of death. We must not remain here a moment longer!

Let our women, children, and our old repair to the island Sankhoddhara, while we men go to Prabhasa from where the Saraswati flows west.

We shall purify ourselves by bathing in those sacred waters and worship the Devatas with the proper rituals and offerings.

We will seek the blessings of the Maharishis, giving them rich gifts of cloth, gold, land, cows, elephants, horses, chariots and mansions.

In this manner, the mortal peril that threatens us might be averted; for, adoring the Gods, holy Sages and cows does indeed bring blessings upon all the living.'

The Yadava elders all readily agreed to follow Krishna, the bane of Madhu's, plan. They crossed the sea in boats and journeyed toward Prabhasa in their chariots.

Arriving, they began to perform the sacred rites that Krishna told them to, as well as many other rituals.

Later, as fate stalked them closer, they drank large quantities of the heady wine Maireya.

Under the influence of the potent brew, those haughty kshatriyas soon began to quarrel. Also, Krishna's powerful will influenced them, for their time had come to leave this world.

The fight blazed up, and, seizing bow and arrow, sword, mace, spear and javelin, they shot and hewed at one another.

They climbed into chariots, mounted camel, mule, bull, buffalo and horse; their colourful banners flew in the sea wind; and they savaged each other as elephants in musth do bamboo thickets with their tusks.

Pradyumna fought Samba, Aniruddha battled Satyaki; Akrura and Bhoja duelled, Subhadra and Sangaramajita, the ferocious Gada with his namesake Gada, Sumitra and Suratha.

Under the spell of violence that Krishna cast over them, other inebriated Yadu kshatriyas thrust and hacked at one another – Nisatha, Ulmukha, Sahasrajit, Satajit, and Bhanu.

Forgetting their kinship, the various Yadava clans fought bitterly – the Dasarhas, the Vrishnis, the Andhakas, Bhojas, Sattvatas, Madhus, Arbudas, Maathuras, Soorasenas, Visarjanas, Kukuras, Kuntis and the rest.

Sons fought their fathers, brothers their brothers, uncles and nephews, grandfathers their grandsons, friend their friends, kinsman with kinsman, and, utterly deluded by Krishna's maya, they slaughtered their nearest and dearest ones.

When they exhausted their arrows and had broken their blades and maces, they plucked up the eraka reeds grown in a great bank, from the Rishis' curse – the reeds that had grown from the powdered pestle they had cast into the sea.

The moment they pulled up those occult reeds, the erakas turned into adamantine blades and staffs in their hands. With these, they rushed roaring at one another. When Krishna tried to stop them, they attacked him as well.

Balarama cried out to them to stop, and they ran at him, also, to kill him with the glinting reed weapons.

Pretending to become enraged, Rama and Krishna also pulled up some reeds and, wielding them like staffs of iron, smashed down their kinsmen, beautiful bodies and heads shattering, blood spraying everywhere.

When the wind blows bamboo stalks together in a bamboo forest, a spark ignites and catches, swiftly burning the whole forest down. So, too, did the conflagration sparked by Krishna's maya among the Yadavas consume that clan, within a brief hour.

When only mangled and bloody corpses were left of his magnificent people, Krishna heaved a sigh. He knew that he had removed the last remaining part of the Earth's burden, fulfilling the mission for which he had been born. Calm stole over his spirit.

Meanwhile, Balarama sat down upon the sand on that shore of fate and, without a word, plunged into the deepest dhyana, into samadhi. He united his Atman with the Parabrahman, and gave up his human form. Turning into a great Naga, Narayana's rest Adisesha, he slid into the sea and was gone.

Krishna watched Balarama's transformation and saw him leave the world. Krishna sat down under an aswattha tree that grew near the shoreline.

He was four-armed now, and lit up the place with unearthly lustre, like a fire that has no heat or smoke.

He was blue as a thunderhead, the Srivatsa marked his deep chest, and his pitamabara robes shone like gold.

He was auspicious, entirely beautiful, his face like a lotus lit by a beatific smile and eyes that shone like soft suns.

He wore sparkling alligator earrings, a golden girdle, the sacred thread, a crown, bracelets and armlets, pearl necklaces, anklets, the Kaustubha ruby glowed at his throat, and the vanamala he wore was fragrant as Devaloka.

His ayudhas materialised around him; embodied now, they were shimmering divinities. He sat becalmed and radiant under the aswattha, his left foot, red as a crimson lotus with earth and blood from the slaughter, resting upon right thigh. He sat yoked in dhyana.

Jara the vetala, who had found the unground piece of the pestle of the Rishis' curse and fashioned an arrowhead out of it, was out hunting. He saw Krishna's red foot around the bole of the aswattha tree and mistook it for the face of a red deer. Taking careful aim, he loosed his fateful arrow, deadly true to its mark.

Krishna's cry echoed there. Jara ran to the tree, and rounding it, saw a majestic, splendent, four-armed human form. He knew at once who this was and trembled at what he had done. He flung himself at the feet of the Lord.

Jara cried, 'Oh, my Lord Madhusudana, I am a sinner and did not know what I did! O infinitely holy and auspicious One, forgive me, ah, forgive me or I am doomed.

O Vishnu, the Munis say that the very thought of you washes away all a man's sins, and dispels his ignorance. And look at what I have done, the harm that I have done to you.

I am just a hunter of animals. I beg you, Lord, kill me instantly that never again do I proudly sin against any Mahatma.

Not Brahma, his son Rudra, the Devas or the Maharishis, masters of the Veda, fathom the mystery of the universe: your creation. For their minds are under the sway of your maya. Then how can a mere vetala understand that you, matchless one, can be cursed by the Rishis and the curse come true?'

Sri Bhagavan said, 'Jara, fear not. Arise, what you have done is my will and nothing else. And now, by my will, also, you will find the Swarga where men go that do great punya.'

Jara rose and walked thrice around Krishna in pradakshina. Meanwhile, a marvellous vimana flashed down from the sky and, climbing into it, Jara attained Heaven by Krishna's blessing, Krishna who had assumed a human form at his will.

After the massacre of the Yadus, the Lord's sarathy, Daruka, was searching desperately for Krishna. He smelt the scent of tulasi leaves, borne on the breeze, and following that aroma, arrived at the aswattha tree under which Krishna sat.

He saw his master under the tree, and the shining weapons, embodied, attending upon him. Full of love, Daruka leapt down from his ratha in excitement, ran to Krishna and fell at his feet. Tears flowed down his face.

Daruka sobbed, 'Lord, I could not find you anywhere and was like a blind man, plunged in darkness. I was as one lost in a starless night, after the moon has set, and I had no peace!'

As Daruka spoke, he saw the chariot, the Jaitra that flew the banner of Garuda, rise into the sky, horses, flagstaff and all.

The embodied ayudhas had climbed into the ratha. Daruka stood awestruck and benumbed.

Krishna said gently to him, 'Sarathy, run to Dwaraka now. Tell all my kin that remain there how the Yadavas killed one another. Tell them that Balarama has left this world with Yoga, as I will soon, as well.

No one should remain in Dwaraka once that happens, none of our friends or family, for when I leave this world the city of the Yadus will sink beneath the waves.

Take your families, all of you, and my parents, and go with Arjuna to the city of Indraprastha.

As for you, Daruka, establish yourself in the Atmagyana. Renounce every attachment and live the Bhagavata Dharma as I have taught it to you. Realise that this universe is just an expression of my maya; be at peace and free from sorrow.'

Daruka made many pradakshinas around the Lord. He prostrated at Krishna's feet and set those sacred feet on his head. Then, rising, his tears still flowing, he turned back to Dwaraka."

AFTER KRISHNA LEAVES THE WORLD

SRI SUKA SAID, "BRAHMA FLEW DOWN TO WHERE KRISHNA SAT UNDER the aswattha tree. Bhava and Bhavani came there, as did Indra and his Devas, the Manus and Prajapatis.

A host of Siddhas, Pitrs, Gandharvas, Vidyadharas, great Nagas, Charanas, Yakshas, Rakshasas, Kinnaras, Apsaras and Dwijas arrived there, as well. They came in profound curiosity to witness how Krishna left the world.

They sang about his birth and hymns about his life. The sky was crowded with vimanas past counting, from which lustrous and fabulous celestials poured down heaven's finest blooms over that shore and over Krishna, in bhakti.

Krishna saw Brahma and the other Gods, all his own divine manifestations. He shut his eyes and lost himself in samadhi – he absorbed his Atman into the Brahman.

As the others watched, agog, he vanished before their eyes, taking his exquisite body, which had enchanted the world, upon which the Sages fix their minds in dhyana. He did not consume it, as they had thought, with yogic fire. And Krishna dwells in Vaikuntha even today, so his bhaktas can worship and commune with him.

The sky now rained flowers; it erupted with drumrolls of the Gods. Yet, when Krishna left the world, dharma, compassion, glory and prosperity followed him out of it, and the kali yuga entered it wholly.

Brahma and the other Gods looked with mystic vision into their respective worlds for the vanished Krishna. All they caught was a flashing glimmer of him, an awesome and wondrous glimpse, and none of them could trace the course he took.

They were like men who see a streak of lightning above the clouds, but can scarcely follow its path.

Brahma, Rudra and the other Divines watched the Ascent of Krishna, and it took their breath away. Then, they returned to their own realms, singing praises of what they had seen.

Rajan, the Lord incarnates and vanishes rather like an actor assuming a role for a while. He does this using his mayashakti. It is the same with the universe. He creates it, enters into it, sports, and then dissolves the cosmos, as if it had never existed; while, he remains unaffected, eternal, glorious and immortal.

He brought his Guru Sandipani's son back from Yama's land. He, who protects all his bhaktas, saved your life, even after you were stillborn from the power of Aswatthama's astra, the Brahmasirsa. He prevailed over Siva, who destroys death. Can such a One not save himself from death?

He, by himself, creates, preserves and destroys all the worlds. Can he not then make his human form immortal? Yet, he wished to respect the curse of the Munis, as well as to show that the body is inconsequential, that the spirit is everything.

He that relates the tale of the ascension of Krishna will himself find the pristine condition to which the Avatara returned.

When Krishna vanished, Daruka his sarathy went back to Dwaraka and fell at the feet of Vasudeva and Ugrasena. His tears soaked their feet.

Rajan, Daruka told them how the Yadavas had slaughtered one another at Prabhasa, to the last man. He told them of Krishna's leaving the world and they sat numbed by grief.

The women heard the news and their wailing echoed through the palace and the Sea City. They went immediately to Prabhasa, slapping their own faces and sobbing, to the sacred place where they saw all their men, husbands, fathers, brothers and sons lying dead and dismembered, their blood splashed everywhere.

Devaki, Rohini and Vasudeva fainted when they did not see their sons, Balarama and Krishna, when they knew they would never see them again in this world.

It is told that Vasudeva never awoke from that swoon. Countless women committed sati upon the pyres on which their husbands were burned.

Some say Rama left his body behind and his wives lifted that magnificent body onto a pyre and immolated themselves around it. Vasudeva's wives did the same, as did the widows of Krishna's sons. Rukmini and Krishna's other widows entered the flames together, their hearts full of just him.

Arjuna, whom Daruka had fetched to Dwaraka, moved about like a man in a nightmare. He thought intently of what Krishna had taught him on the field of Kurukshetra – of the Bhagavad Gita, the Song of God.

Finding some calm, he performed the last rites for those that had no one else, no sons, to do so.

Meanwhile, soon after Krishna left the Earth, the sea swelled in huge tides and drowned that peerless and magical city. Only the mansion in which Krishna had lived remained above water.

There, the Lord Krishna dwells forever. That is the most auspicious place, the very thought of which burns up the sins of men.

Arjuna took all the Yadava survivors with him to Indraprastha where he crowned Vajra king.

Rajan, Arjuna came to Hastinapura and told Yudhishtira about the events at Prabhasa. Yudhishtira then set you upon his own throne, crowned you king of the Kurus and the Pandavas set out on their final journey, which would lead them also out of this world.

He that studies and recites the account of the marvellous Krishna Avatara of the Lord, with bhakti, and particularly the legends of his childhood, as we have described them here, or as he finds them elsewhere – that man will find the highest love for Him to whom the Paramahamsas aspire," Sri Suka said to King Parikshit.

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Skandha 12

ROYAL DYNASTIES AND THEIR DEGENERATION

THE RAJA SAID, "HOLY ONE, WHEN KRISHNA, THE JEWEL OF THE YADAVAS, left the world, who ruled after him? Which dynasty held sway over the land?"

Said Sri Suka, "When I described the dynasty of Brihadratha*, I said that Puranjaya would the last of the twenty kings of that line to rule. His minister, Sunaka, will assassinate that king and set his own son, Pradyota upon the throne. Palaka will rule after Pradyota, then Vishakhayupa, and Rajaka: each one the son of the previous king.

Nandivardhana succeeds his father Rajaka, and altogether these five kings, named the Pradyotas, will reign for a hundred and thirty-eight years.

Nandivardhana's son will be Sishunaga; his son, Kakavarna; his son, Kshemadharma; his son, Kshetrajna; his son, Vidhisara; his son, Ajatashatru; his son, Darbhaka; and Darbhaka's son will be Ajaya.

Ajaya's son will be another Nandivardhana, and his son, Mahanandi. These ten kings are called the Sishunagas, and they will rule the Earth for three hundred and sixty years of the kali yuga.

Rajan, Mahanandi will take a Sudra woman unto himself and have a son called Nanda, who will be great, powerful and prosperous.

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* See Skandha 9.

He will destroy all the remaining kshatriya kings of the world. After this, the kings of the Earth will be mainly Sudras, given to sinful ways.

Nanda will be a man of inexorable strength and prowess, and, when he has razed all the kshatriya houses, even as Parasurama once did all the ancient bloodlines, he will reign as the sole sovereign.

Nanda will have eight sons, the eldest being Sumalya. These will rule for a hundred years, enjoying the land.

A brahmana called Chanakya will exterminate the dynasty of the nine Nandas, and then the Mauryas will enjoy the land of Bharata during the kali yuga.

The brahmana, Chanakya, will crown Chandragupta Maurya as king. Chandragupta's son will be Varisara, and his son Asokavardhana.

Asoka's son will be Suyasas; his son, Sangata; his son, Salisuka; and his son, Somasrama.

Somasrama will beget Satadhanava, who will sire Brihadratha. The ten kings of the House of Maurya will rule the Earth in the kali yuga for three hundred and thirty-seven years.

Pushpamitra, the son of Brihadratha's seṇapati, will murder his king and take the throne for himself. He will be the first of the Sunga dynasty. After him, his son Agnimitra will rule, then, Sujyeshta.

Vasumitra will reign after Sujyeshta; and after him, Pulinda. Those that follow will be Ghosha, Vajramitra, Bhagavata, and Devabhuti. These will rule the Earth for one hundred and twelve years.

After the Sunga the dynasty named Kanva, of no note, will rule. The last Sunga, Devabhuti, will be a wanton and a debauch and his cunning minister Kanva, also called Vasudeva, will murder him and take the throne.

Kanva's son Bhumitra will succeed him, and his son Narayana will rule after Bhumitra. The Kanva dynasty will rule the world for three hundred and forty-five years of the kali yuga.

An advisor of the last of the Kanvas, Susharma, will kill him. This man Bali, a lowborn Sudra, will rule for a time.

Bali's brother, Krishna, becomes king after him; and after him, his son Srisantakarna, and then his son, Pournamasa.

Pournamasa's son will be Lambodara, who will beget Chibilaka; who will father Meghasvati, and his son will be called Atmaan.

Atmaan's son will be Anishtakarma; his son, Haaleya; and his son, Talaka. Talaka's son will be Pureeshabheeru, whose son will be Sunandana. His eldest son will be called Chakora, and he will have eight other sons, besides.

The son of the eighth will rule, and his name will be Sivasvaati. He will beget Arindama, who will sire Gomatiputra; and he, Puriman. Puriman's son will be Medassiras; his son, Sivaskanda; his son, Yagnasri, from whom Vijaya will be born.

Vijaya's son will be Chandravijna, and his son, Salomadhi. These thirty-six kings will reign for four hundred and fifty-six years.

These will be followed by seven kings of the Abhira dynasty, with Avabhriti as their capital, ten Gardabhas and sixteen Kankas. All these will have vile characters, and be full of greed.

Next, eight Yavanas and fourteen Turushkas will have sway; then, ten Gurundas and eleven Mounas.

Apart from the Mounas, sixty-five Abhiras and other kings will rule: for one thousand and ninety-nine years. The eleven Mounas will rule for three hundred years.

When they are all dead, Bhutananda, Vangiri, Sishunandi and his brother Yasonandi, and Praveeraka will reign for a hundred and six years, in the city of Kilikila.

Thirteen sons will Bhutananda and the others have; these will be called Baahlikas. Another king will rule, too: Pushpamitra, and his son Durmitra, after him.

Besides, there will be seven kings of Andhra, seven Kosala sovereigns, the Vidooras, and the Nishada kings. These will all rule small kingdoms at the same time as the Baahlikas.

Of the kings of Magadha, there will arise a violent monarch called Viswasphurji. He will make three classes of the four varnas: Pulindas, Yadus and Madrakas.

Powerful he will be, and evil. He will decimate the three varnas and rule over a dominantly sudra populace. He will slaughter the kshatriyas and have his capital city at Padmavati. He will rule the entire country from Gangadwara to Prayaga.

The dvijas of Saurashtra, Avanti, Abhra, Sura, Arbudha, Malava and other kingdoms, too, will abandon the rites of purification, like upanayanam, and become Vraatyas. Their kings will be as cultured and noble as sudras, no more.

Mlechhas, of no upanayanam, or Vedic learning, will rule the valleys of the Sindhu, the city of Kaunti, the country of Kashmira, and other lands, as well.

These barbarians will rule, at the same time, in different parts of the sacred land. They will all be evil, adharmis, but will keep the formalities of kingship.

Miserly they will be, full of anger, greed and lust: tyrants that torment women, holy men, and even children. The wealth and wives of other men will be their prey, and chasing these will they spend all their waking hours, performing no sacred rite, doing no punya whatever.

These will, naturally, be weaklings and short-lived, dominated by rajas and tamas, tyranny their norm.

The people, too, will turn to similar ways, following their kings in their minds and deeds. Calamity after calamity will overtake all the land, when kings and people have both turned to the vilest corruption. The age will darken, day by day, inexorably," said Sri Suka.

THE ADVANCE OF THE KALI YUGA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, GRIMLY, “AS THE AGE TURNS TO EVIL, EVERY virtue decays and vanishes: honesty, forbearance, cleanliness, kindness, longevity, memory and strength.

Wealth replaces a noble birth, character and conduct, while judging a man. Might becomes right, for might alone determines dharma and justice.

Sexual gratification becomes the only consideration in a marriage. Trade and fraudulent practice become synonymous. Skill in making love comes to be accepted as the main virtue in both men and women. The only holy thing about a brahmana will be the sacred thread he wears.

Appearances will come to signify the four asramas of life: for otherwise, these will be hollow. Universally, the law will favour only the rich, and have no regard for truth or justice. He that can curse and swear best will be considered the finest scholar!

Poverty will be sufficient cause to establish guilt in the eyes of the law, while wealth and ostentation will be indices of character. Copulation will be marriage, and a bath will have no ritual or sacred, but only hygienic significance.

A tirtha will mean only a body of water. Good coiffure will become tantamount to beauty. Men will live to eat, and not eat to sustain themselves. Boldness, even brashness, of speech will be equal to dharma.

He that maintains his family, even by the foulest means, will be considered respectable. Swadharma will be observed sheerly for exhibition.

When men diminish thus, and decay, anyone – brahmana, kshatriya, vaisya or sudra – who is strong and daring may become a king. And they will rule like greedy, lustful bandits, with plunder and rapine of their own subjects, who will often flee such tyranny and seek refuge in forests and upon mountains.

Exhausted by cruel taxes, deprived of rains in lands from which true dharma has fled, the people will subsist on wild vegetation, roots, flesh, honey, fruit, flowers and tubers.

Ravaged by thirst and hunger, always haunted by anxiety, from within and without, peaceless, prey of every manner of scourge and disease, the men of kali yuga will live brief lives, of perhaps twenty or thirty years, as the age advances.

When, because of pervasive evil, men have grown weak; when the dharma of the four varnas and asramas prescribed in the Veda has been lost; when the philosophies of atheists have wide sway;

When kings have become mere robbers; when all men, driven by despair and poverty, have become thieves, liars and murderers; when all the varnas have descended to the level of sudras;

When cows have dwindled to the size of goats; when asramas have become houses of pleasure like common homes; when a sexual relationship is the only kind of relationship that is sought after or acknowledged;

When once great plants have dwindled to the size of little grasses; when awesome trees have become like sami plants, small and hardly casting any shade around them; when clouds emit lightning but no rain;

When the homes of men have become devoid of sacred rituals; when the kali yuga has advanced, mantling the good Earth in darkness and evil; when men have become like beasts, then the Lord will incarnate again.

He will come in a form of pure sattva to resuscitate and uphold the Sanatana Dharma.

The Avataras of Vishnu, who is the Brahman and the universal Guru, are born to rescue the dharma of the Rishis in the darkest times, as well as to free the holy men from the bonds of karma.

The Lord will be born in the village of Sambala, as the son of its headman Vishnuyasas, and he will be called Kalki.

Riding a wind-swift steed, Devadatta, owning the ashtaishwarya – the eight occult powers – and peerless splendour, He will blaze across the blighted Earth at the speed of thought, slaying the numberless brigands and slaughterers masquerading as kings.

When the last one has been killed and the Earth delivered, the people will scent the divine fragrance of the sacred body of Narayana, and the unearthly anointments with which he is smeared. And that redolence will purify their hearts plunged in darkness, and they will come to grace.

With Vasudeva, who embodies strength and purity, established in their hearts, the men of the Earth will go forth and beget sons and daughters of great prowess and nobility of mind.

From the moment of the birth of the Lord Kalki, a new krita yuga begins, and a generation of men and women with the sattva guna dominant in their bodies and natures, comes to people Bhumi.

When the Moon, the Sun and Jupiter align in a single sign with the asterism Pushyami, it is the dawning of the krita yuga, the blemishless age.

This is a brief account of the dynasties of the Sun and the Moon, in the past, the present and the future.

From the day of your birth to the crowning of Nanda, a thousand one hundred and fifteen years will elapse. (Some say one thousand four hundred and ninety-eight).

Whatever nakshatra is to be seen, at night, in the same longitude as the pole stars of the Saptarishi, which become visible before dawn, the Saptarishi (the Great Bear) is associated with that asterism and its constellation for a hundred years. Now, during your reign, Rajan, that nakshatra is Magha.

This was also the same hundred years during which Vishnu's most splendid Avatara, who was called Krishna, left this Bhumi, and the kali yuga entered the world, rousing the deepest evil in men's hearts from long slumber.

As long as Remapati, Consort of the Devi Lakshmi, walked the face of the Earth, the evil of the kali yuga could not rule the hearts of men.

The kali yuga began when the Saptarishi, the constellation of seven Sages, was in the nakshatra Magha. This age will last one thousand and two hundred years of the Devas, each day of which is a year of this world of men.

During the reign of Nanda, kali moves from Magha into Purvashada; and then, the malignity of the yuga becomes truly intense and spreads across the green Earth like a plague.

The Rishis say that the kali yuga entered the world the very moment that Krishna left it, for his presence held it at bay.

When the kali yuga ends, when one thousand and two hundred years have passed, men's minds will once again have the power to fathom the truth of the Atman. And then, another krita yuga begins.

The dynasties of kings, from Manu down, rise and fall in punya and dharma from yuga to yuga; so, also, do all men – brahmanas, vaisyas and sudras become virtuous and wanton with the changing ages.

All the great kings of the Earth are now mere shadows in memory, surviving only in name and legend. No trace remains of their awesome deeds; none of their offspring survive.

However, Shantanu's brother, Devaapi of the House of the Moon, and Maru of the Solar dynasty were both masters of Yoga. These two are still alive in the village called Kalaapa.

They will return to human society, and, inspired by the Lord, bring back varnasrama and the other sacred dharmas.

All the living, born into this world in the recurring cycle of four yugas – krita, treta, dwapara and kali – are ruled by the spirit of the age into which they are born.

Rajan, all these mighty sovereigns and the others of whom I have told you lived in this world, identifying themselves with their bodies. Finally, though, all of them had to leave those bodies, and everything they owned, and die.

They were called Rajas, majestic monarchs, but finally they were food for worms, dirt and ashes. Hell is all that awaits those that identify themselves with their bodies and tyrannise other living creatures. Such fools have no notion of their own best interest.

They identify with this brief mortal life and think: 'My ancestors ruled this country before me, how can I make it secure for my sons and grandsons and their children?'

But when death came for them they had to abandon everything that they had thought of as being immortal – the body made of the Panchabhutas, and all that they considered its possessions.

The most awesome kings finally dissolve into mere names and figures in legends."

OVERCOMING THE EVILS OF THE KALI YUGA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "BHUMI DEVI SAW THE KINGS OF THE EARTH intent upon acquiring more and more territories for themselves, by conquest, and she mocked them. 'These vain rulers, mere puppets in death's hands, dream of subduing me.

How illusory are the objects that they desire, even the most learned of them, believing their bodies to be permanent, while they are, in truth, as lasting as foam upon water.

Full of violence, they think: *We will first conquer our senses, since no other achievement is possible without that. Then, we will win the hearts of the ministers, military commanders, and the people of other kingdoms. With no obstacle standing in our way, anymore, we will extend our sway, land by land, until we rule the very world, from sea to sea.*

Their hearts full of ambition, they do not see Yama, Death, standing beside them.

Why, some kings are not satisfied with having sway over all land to the shores of the sea, but cross the very ocean to conquer other continents. How insignificant and meaningless are such conquests, when compared to the conquest of oneself: the conquest that leads to moksha!

How dim-witted are these shortlived ones, who think that I, the Earth, can ever be conquered or belong to them – when the Manus and their sons hardly ruled me for a brief season. And then, they too left even as they came.

For this impossible conquest, they violate dharma: father fights son, brother kills brother, these men whose hearts are full of darkness and ignorance.

Each one claims me, the Earth, for himself; and they all go to war with one another and perish, taking countless lives with them.

Why some of the greatest of them, sovereigns belonging to both the races, of men and Asuras, were Prithu, Pururavas, Gadhi, Nahusha, Bharata, Arjuna, Mandhata, Sagara, Rama, Khatvanga, Dhundhumara, Raghu, Trinabindu, Yayati, Saryati, Shantanu, Gaya, Bhageeratha, Kuvalayasva, Kakutstha, Nishada, Nriga, Hiranyakashyapu, Vritra, Ravana, Namuchi, Sambara, Narakasura, Hiranyaksha, Tarakasura.

These, and many others, too, were all deep scholars and indomitably valiant. Never were they vanquished in battle, but always triumphant.

Yet, despite their learning and wisdom, all of them thought of me, this Bhumi, the Earth, as belonging to them, while the truth was that, one day, they would all die.

Time eclipsed them all, with their ambitions unfulfilled and now their achievements and glory are mere shades, whispers of memory. Just their names remain to tell that they lived and ruled.'

Thus, the Earth gently mocked the greatest of great kings that ruled upon her, once.

Rajan, these are the tales of the mighty sovereigns that were living legends in the world, but then, invariably, passed on and became memories and names that lingered on in stories. These tales I have told have no meaning other than to instil the spirit of renunciation in you, and to lead you to moksha.

Those that seek bhakti for Krishna should listen just to the tales of his sacred life, being sung, chanted or told by his devotees. Let them hear just that, and nothing else ever."

The king said, "O Muni, tell me how those that are born into the kali yuga can protect themselves against the burgeoning evils of this age.

Tell me about the different yugas, and the dharma that is practised in each. Tell me about the Pralaya and the manifestation of the worlds; tell me about Time, Kaala, which, I have heard, is only Mahavishnu manifest: He who is the Lord of all."

Sri Suka said, "Rajan, in the krita yuga, the dharma that men observe is perfect and four-fold: satyam, daya, tapas and dana. Truth, mercy, austerity and generosity.

The people of that age are contented, compassionate, friendly toward all beings and creatures, calm, restrained, patient, impartial, spiritual, and seek their joy in the Atman.

In the treta yuga, a fourth part of the four aspects of dharma is perverted – by untruth, cruelty, discontent, and conflict.

Rajan, in this age, too, the people will lead spiritual lives and observe rituals and tapasya. They will not be overly cruel, attached or wanton. They will, indeed, maintain the purusharthas: dharma, artha and kama. They will know the Veda and their lives be ruled by ritual.

In the dwapara yuga, satyam, daya, tapasya and dana will dwindle by half and be replaced in half by their opposite vices and sins: dishonesty, slaughter, wantonness, and hatred.

The kshatriyas and brahmanas will come to rule the Earth, and the four varnas will become attached to fame and the performance of ostentatious yagnas. They will continue to study the Veda. They will be fond of earning wealth, be joyful and live the rich lives of grihastas.

In the kali yuga, only a fourth part of the perfect and four-fold dharma of the krita yuga survives. Three quarters of dharma will be overwhelmed and capitulate to adharma and the forces of evil and darkness.

Men will become perverse and bestial – miserly, ruthless, greedy, misfortunate and vindictive for the flimsiest reasons. Sudras and fishermen will be foremost among the varnas.

Sattva, rajas and tamas comprise the natures of all beings that live in time. Time is a form of the Lord. During the different ages, different gunas dominate.

During the krita yuga, the mind and the senses are ruled by the sattva guna: men incline naturally and strongly toward the life of the spirit and in tapasya. Their aim is mukti.

When the hearts of men are drawn more toward dharma, artha and kama, the treta yuga has dawned, when the rajoguna, rajas, rules.

When greed, discontent, arrogance, hypocrisy and conflict begin to prevail over the tranquil virtue, and men become dedicated ritualists, the dwapara yuga has come, during which age rajas and tamas rule together, with tamas waxing steadily.

During the kali yuga, deception, dishonesty, sloth, somnolence, cruelty of every kind, grief, delusion, terror and wretchedness rule: this is the age of tamas.

Influenced by the spirit of this yuga, men become dull and narrow-minded, luckless, gluttonous, impoverished and wildly lustful. Most women will be adulteresses.

Brigands and robbers will rule the land. Atheists will pervert the meaning of the very Veda to suit their greedy ends. Kings will all be tyrants. Dwijas will espouse gluttony, lasciviousness and venality of every kind.

Brahmacharins will violate their sacred vows, and lead impure lives. Grihastas will no longer give holy alms, but become mendicants and beggars. Vanaprasthas will live in towns and villages, and Sannyasins will be the greediest and most wanton among all men.

Women will be short, gluttons, shameless, sharp-tongued, promiscuous, thieving, brash and rash, and without character, chastity or purity of any kind.

The vilest men will become the foremost traders, and make cheating and thievery the common practice of the marketplace. Even when they are not threatened with any danger, men will take to otherwise forbidden means to earn their livelihood, and pride themselves on it.

Servants will leave their masters if the masters fall upon hard times, even if the masters possess every virtue. Masters, too, will dispense with their servants, without a second thought, if they fall ill: even if their families have been in their service for generations. Cows that grow old and do not yield anymore will be slaughtered or abandoned.

No more will the old relationships be valued between parents and children, brothers, friends and relations: everyone will seek only sexual liaisons, and spend their time with their brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law! Their spirits will turn weak from indulgence in sexuality.

Sudras will masquerade as Sannyasins and make their living by taking dana and receiving gifts. Seated upon the sacred thrones of great and holy Gurus of yore, men that are masters only of vice will expound dharma to the gullible populace.

Rajan, depleted by dreadful taxes, tormented by drought, starved, owning none of the bare necessities of life – homes, clothes, food and drink, a bed, a bath, some ornaments and enjoyment – men will seem more like bhutas and pisachas.

For small change, members of the same family will fight their own blood, even unto death, forgetting all ties of affection.

No one will bother to look after their old parents anymore. They will live only for themselves: to eat and to gratify their ravening sexual hunger. Why, men and women will neglect their own children, however gifted.

O King, their minds subverted by the sophistries of deadly atheists, men of the kali yuga will no longer worship Narayana, whom even Brahma and the Devas adore.

They will not revere Him, whose very name, if called with fervour, saves one from bondage and bestows moksha – most of all, if He is called upon when one is in dire straits, faced with a fall from a lofty height, mortal danger, or death.

For when the Lord Achyuta enters into a man's heart, he roots out all the evils of the kali yuga that have darkened and enslaved that heart through contaminated food, dwelling and sensual contacts. He sets that heart free.

When a man listens to the legends of the Lord, hymns the Lord, meditates upon Him, worships Him, adores Him, the Lord enters into that man's heart. When He does this, He makes ashes of the sins of countless lifetimes, and of the evil tendencies accumulated by the nature of the man.

Only when it is heated in fire can discoloured gold be made clean again. Only when God enters the heart of a seeker are his sins destroyed.

Learning the Shastras, asceticism, pranayama, compassion for all beings, tirtha yatras, vratas, dana, chanting mantras: none of these can purify the human heart forever, so it never returns to evil. Only the living presence of God in the heart can achieve that permanent transformation.

Hence, O King, do your best to establish Narayana in your heart. Your death is near you; if you fix your mind in dhyana on Him, you can certainly attain moksha.

God, the Parabrahman, is the One: the only Being upon whom a dying man should meditate. For He is the support and the soul of all the living, and He takes those that surrender to Him, back to himself.

The kali yuga is certainly the heart of evil; yet, it has one virtue that none of the other yugas do. This is the only age in which kirtana, singing the Lord's legends, or even japa, chanting his names, suffices to purify a man's heart and give him moksha.

In the krita yuga, salvation is to be had by long dhyana, through yagnas, great sacrifices, in the treta yuga, and elaborate rituals in the dwapara yuga. However, the same fruit is available by just kirtana in the kali yuga."

THE FOUR PRALAYAS

SRI SUKA SAID, "RAJAN, I HAVE ALREADY TOLD YOU* ABOUT KAALA, TIME, from its most minuscule, atomic dimension, fractional moments or nimeshas, to the vast Dwiparardha. I have told you about the yugas and their duration. Let me now describe the Kalpas and the Pralayas to you.

A thousand chaturyugas is one day of Brahma. This is a Kalpa. In every Kalpa, there are fourteen Manus, each one the sovereign of a Manvantara.

When the Kalpa ends, Brahma's night begins: a Pralaya, a state of dissolution, when the three lokas cease to be. This lasts a thousand chaturyugas, as well.

This night of Brahma is called a Naimittika Pralaya: a dissolution with a cause, which is the sleep of Brahma. During this cosmic night, Mahavishnu, lying upon Anantasesha, withdraws the universe into himself. Brahma, too, sleeps within the Being of Narayana.

A Dwiparardha is a hundred years of Brahma, each one consisting of three hundred and sixty Kalpas and Pralayas. When a Dwiparardha ends, all seven evolutes of Prakriti – Mahatattva, Ahamkara, and the five Tanmatras – dissolve into their causal condition.

This is called Prakrita Pralaya. Now not merely the manifested universe but the very Golden Egg, the Cosmic Shell, ceases to exist, even in essence. This happens through God's will.

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* See Skandha 3.

Rajan, just before this Great Pralaya, the Lord of the clouds, Parjannya, will not send down any rain for a hundred years. Without food, men become cannibals, and every living creature under the sun perishes, all the species.

The savage sun of this time dries up the oceans, rivers and lakes, up even from the Patalas; it drains away the fluids from the bodies of living beings. Not a drop of rain falls.

Then, from the jaws of Adisesha there issue the awesome flames of the Pralaya. Fanned by towering winds, this inferno consumes the worlds of nether, now creatureless. The Apocalypse quickly makes the universe seem like a dry cowdung-cake ablaze.

Now the ferocious winds of the Pralaya blow for a hundred years and turn the sky into a mass of dust the colour of smoke. After this, clouds of many vivid colours scud into the firmament and lash the worlds with a ceaseless downpour for another hundred years. Thunder and lightning erupt across the cosmos and, in time, all the galaxies, and the Cosmic Shell are extinguished and submerged in the waters of the Mahapralaya, Great Deluge.

The element earth is reabsorbed into its original essence: the sense of smell. Water absorbs smell, absorbing earth. Then fire absorbs the sense of taste, which is water, absorbing water.

Colour, the essence of fire, dissolves into air, and then air, too, dissolves as touch into akasa, sky.

The tamasic aspect of Ahamkara absorbs sound, which is the essence of cosmic ether, absorbing akasa.

Mahatattva absorbs Ahamkara, and is, in turn, dissolved into the gunas sattva, rajas and tamas. Rajan, directed by Kaala, original Prakriti recalls the gunas into undivided Pradhana.

Time's divisions, like day and night and the rest, have no sway over Pradhana; for, Pradhana is their Cause, Itself without beginning, end, or manifestation: eternal and changeless.

In Pradhana there is no speech, no mind, no gunas, nor the evolutes of these such as Mahat. There is no prana here, no buddhi, no indriyas or their devas. There is no impulse, even, toward creation, in which all these manifest as the edifice that becomes the universe.

Pradhana contains neither waking nor dream, nor dreamless sleep. It does not contain the five elements. There is no sun. Yet, because it defies understanding, it is not nothingness, or the lack of consciousness. Why, it is the very seed from which the universe and everything in it germinates.

The condition known as the Prakrita Pralaya is when all things that originate in Prakriti and Purusha cease to exist, and when Kaala terminates the forces of creation.

The intellect and the objects and ideas that it perceives are fundamentally nothing other than pure Chitta, consciousness, of which they are formed. Samsara has a beginning and an end; it is evanescent and not ultimate. The objects of perception do not exist by themselves, but only when they are perceived; thus, they, too, have no independent reality, but are based upon consciousness.

Light, vision and the forms that sight perceives – none of these has any existence without the Universal Light. So, also, the intellect, the senses and their objects have no existence apart from their cause, which is Consciousness: the eternal Truth, Self-existent and the opposite of everything that is transitory and unreal.

The states of waking, dream and sleep are conditions of buddhi, the intellect. Seeing many in the pervasive One is mere maya.

This universe is a concatenation of many always-mutable parts, and hence has no permanence. All the universes appear and vanish in Brahman, even as clouds do in the sky.

When any whole can be divided, its component parts have primary reality rather than their sum. For the parts continue to exist even when they are driven from the whole, which, however, cannot exist without all its causative parts. A piece of cloth does not exist without the thread from which it is woven, but the thread exists before the cloth and after it is unravelled, and also while it is the cloth.

The universe cannot exist without Brahman, but Brahman exists without the universe: before, after and during the existence of the universe.

Cause and effect are delusions, maya; this is true of everything that begins and ends.

The manifest universe is experienced; yet, it cannot exist without the pervasive Brahman. Consciousness illumines the experience of the manifest universe, and consciousness is founded in the Self-illumined Atman.

The Truth is One and always undivided. He that says otherwise, who posits a manifold creation, is an ignorant man. The sky is one, even if it is reflected in many water vessels; as is the sun reflected in many mirrors; or the air within one's body and without.

Gold is a single substance, even if wrought into many ornaments, kataka and kundala. So, too, the Brahman is One, whom the senses cannot fathom or perceive, albeit the Vedas and the Shastras describe Him in different ways, with inadequate words.

Clouds come from the sun and they obscure vision, which is also lit by the sun. One power or quality issuing from a source can be affected by another from that same source. Thus, ahamkara, which derives from Brahman, prevents the jiva, which also issues from Brahman, from realising its true and pristine nature: that of being a part of Brahman.

When clouds, born of the heat of the sun, are scattered, then the eyes behold the sun in his full splendour. When ahamkara is destroyed by dhyana, the Atman realises his identity with the Brahman.

When the sword of gyana severs the knot of the ego, which the Lord's own maya produces, the jiva realises that he is one with Narayana. This severance of the final knot, and the resultant liberation, moksha, is called Aatyantika Pralaya.

There are some subtle thinkers who say that, every moment, all beings from Brahma down are born and die: over and over. Thus there is a constant stream of creation and destruction. This Pralaya is called Nitya Pralaya.

A stream that flows or a flame that burns does indeed change from moment to moment and become a new stream or flame. So, it might be inferred, does the entire universe and our own bodies. Only, Time's maya, which is an aspect of God, creates the delusion that the continuum has no constant beginning and end, birth and death.

These, Rajan, are the four Pralayas – Nitya, Naimittika, Prakrita and Atyantika. The first occurs daily, each moment; the second after a Kalpa; the third after a lifetime of Brahma; and the last, Atyantika, is final. This is the way of Kaala, Time.

O Kurushreshta, best of the Kurus, I have told you briefly about the Avataras of the Lord Narayana, which he assumes in divine play, lila: He who is home of all beings, the Creator of all the universes. To describe all his incarnations and deeds is a task beyond Brahma.

The man burning in the threefold hellfires of samsara, birth, life and death, who feels the urge to escape the misery and torment that engulfs him, had best listen to the sacred Purana of the Lord. For there is no better craft on which to cross the dreadful sea.

The Rishi Narayana of Badarikasrama first told this Book of the Most Ancient Wisdom to Narada Muni. Narada Muni revealed it to the Rishi Krishna Dwaipayana.

Rajan, from his deep love, that Sage, also called Baadarayana, instructed me, his son, in the Purana known as the Bhagavata, which is equal to the very Veda.

Kurushreshta, look at this Rishi Romaharshana who sits among us. Upon being implored by those Sages, he will relate this *Bhagavata Purana* to Saunaka and his Rishis in the Naimisaranya, during their prolonged sattra. That is in the future," said the magnificent Suka Deva, the son of the profound Vyasa.

SRI SUKA'S FINAL WORDS

SRI SUKA DEVA SAID, "THIS *BHAGAVATA PURANA* DESCRIBES SRI HARI, OVER and over again; Narayana, from whose urge to create Brahma was born, and from whose urge to destroy, Rudra.

Rajan, renounce the thought that you are going to die; this is a delusion and fit only for animals. For you are not this body, but the Atman that has always existed and always shall.

Your true self was never born as a son is from a father, or a tree from a seed. You were never generated by another being, who in turn ever had birth. Rather, your real self is like fire: seen to be burning wood, but itself beyond the fuel it consumes, not the product of the wood but another, transcendent thing.

In a dream you might see yourself being beheaded. In the state of waking, the death of the body is comparable to this. The Atman is not the body, but a witness to the body. Death does not affect the Atman; He has no birth or death.

When a pot is broken the akasa contained in it escapes into the universal akasa. When the body perishes, with gyana the jiva that dwelt in it unites with the Brahman.

The mind creates the illusions that appear to limit the Atman: bodies, gunas, and karma. Maya creates the mind and entangles the jiva in samsara.

A lamp gives off light as long as its wick, oil and a flame combine. The transmigrations of a jiva are similar: they, too, depend upon the combination of countless, complex factors. Samsara is in constant flux, since it involves the ceaseless combination of sattva, tamas and rajas.

The self-illumined Atman is never born and does not die, but only the body. The Atman is transcendent, immutable, incomparable, beyond all that is manifest and unmanifest, like akasa, eternal: the foundation of all things.

Fix your mind in dhyana upon the Lord Vaasudeva, use your intellect with discernment, and discover the truth of the Atman amidst the creations and illusions of the Atman. .

If you grasp the truth of the Atman, the serpent Takshaka, sent by the Rishi's son, cannot harm you. For death cannot touch one who is united with God who is the Death of death.

'I am Brahman, the Primal Light; I am Brahman, the Primeval Condition': what harm can Takshaka, with his forked tongue and spitting venom, do to one for whom his own body, the snake and his venom, and the very universe has no existence apart from the Brahman?

Precious one, I have told you everything that you wanted to hear about Sri Hari, Soul of the Universe. You have now realised the truth of the Atman. Is there anything further that you wish to hear?" said Sri Suka,'

The blessed Suta Ugrasravas, the son of Romaharshana, says to the Sages of the forest.

THE EMANCIPATION OF PARIKSHIT

SUTA UGRASRAVAS CONTINUES, 'RAJA PARIKSHIT HEARD THESE WORDS of Vyasa's son Suka, who is always steeped in the experience of the Atman in all things. The king went up to the Sage, and prostrated at the feet of the holy one, actually setting those blessed feet on his head. He folded his hands and said,

"You have blessed me, Holy One, and I have gained my life's ultimate aim. I have heard the Purana of the Lord Hari, the Un-born, immortal One, from your lips.

Small wonder, O Muni, that Sages like yourself, who are bhaktas of Achyuta, give solace to the ignorant caught in the web of samsara and tormented by their condition.

Ah, I am truly blessed that I have heard this most sacred Purana from you, the legends of the Lord and the descriptions of his glory.

Holy One, your Purana has set me free from fear, and I experience the bliss of the Brahman. I am not afraid of Takshaka or any other spectre of death.

Bless me that I draw my last breath with all my senses indrawn and my mind entirely without desire, and my prana and my life fixed in dhyana upon the Lord.

Your teachings have ended the sway that the ignorance of avidya and karma held over my heart. For now I am established in the experience and the knowledge of the Atman, the condition of eternal grace and ecstasy that is, verily, the Lord."

So saying, the Raja Parikshit worshipped Suka, who blessed him and then, finally, left along with the other Munis that were with him.

Rajarishi Parikshit sat unmoving, even like a tree, with his mind gathered inward, and restrained by the power of his intellect. Thus, he sat, absorbed in the Paramatman.

He sat on the bank of the Ganga, facing north, upon a bed of darbha grasses whose tips pointed to the east. He was free from every attachment and doubt, perfectly calm, that Mahayogin. He was plunged in the infinite experience of the Brahman: of the rapturous unity of his Atman and that ultimate Godhead.

Sent by the enraged son of the Rishi whom Parikshit had insulted, Takshaka made his way toward the king who sat lost in samadhi. The great serpent came, of course, to kill Parikshit. On his way, he met Kashyapa Muni, who was an expert in curing snakebite, and was also going to Parikshit, to save his life.

Takshaka gave Kashyapa untold wealth, and persuaded him to leave. Takshaka could assume any guise he wanted and he approached Parikshit as a brahmana, and when he was close enough, stung him fatally with terrible fangs and venom like fire.

In a wink, even as all those around them watched, helplessly, Parikshit's body became a mound of ashes, while his spirit remained united with Brahman and he never knew when the Snake King bit him.

Across the Earth, in all the four quarters, and from the sky above, there echoed loud lamentation, cries of dismay. Devas, Asuras and men, who watched, stood transfixed by what they saw.

Then the celestial ones beat upon their subtle drums, so the firmament resounded with those beautiful batteries. The Devas cried *Jaya*! And they poured down storms of the blooms of Swarga over the fragrant remains of Parikshit, who had attained moksha.

But Parikshit's son was incensed. He called together several peerless and powerful brahmanas and undertook a huge sarpa yagna. Into the fire of that sacrifice, he offered numberless snakes of every sort, in wild revenge.

Terrified to see thousands of his kind perishing in that raging agni kunda, to which they were drawn inexorably by the power of the priests, pouring into it in a writhing rain of snakes, Takshaka fled to Indra for refuge.

Parikshit's son, Janamejaya, saw countless serpents being consumed in that yawning fire, but not Takshaka. He asked his priests, "Where is Takshaka? I do not see that worst of all serpents fly into our flames."

The brahmanas replied, "He has sought shelter with Indra, who protects him. The spell of the sarpa yagna does not have the power to overcome Indra's protection."

Red-eyed, Janamejaya said, "Holy ones, cast your spell over Indra, so both are drawn into the flames and perish!"

The brahmanas now bent their wills to Indra himself. In dreadful voices they commanded, "Takshaka, come and burn in our agni with Indra, Lord of the Maruts!"

At the brahmanas' terrible command, a dismayed Indra found his vimana drawn irresistibly toward the fire, with Takshaka and himself inside.

When Angiras' son, Brihaspati, saw Indra and Takshaka plunging down toward Janamejaya's fire, he said to that king, "Rajan, you cannot kill this Naga, for he has drunk the amrita of immortality. Not age or death can lay their hands upon Takshaka.

Besides, for everyone, life, death and what comes after are determined only by each being's karma. No one causes another's joy or sorrow, but only he himself, and his karma.

Prarabdha brings men to their deaths, though apparently these seem to occur by snakebite, robbers, fire, lightning, hunger, thirst or sickness.

Cease this yagna of yours, O King, for this is direly evil magic and you have killed so many innocent snakes already. Surely, it is not your fire but their past karma that has consumed them."

Janamejaya honoured what Brihaspati said to him; he saw the wisdom of the Devaguru's words. He stopped the sarpa yagna and paid obeisance to the Sage.

Mahamaya, Vishnu's impenetrable power, makes jivas – though they are all manifestations of himself – battle one another even to the death. Prakriti overpowers their hearts with her passions: anger and the rest.

The only way to conquer these is to realise the Atman, at which, maya, which dements the intellect of the egoistic man, melts away from him. He finds how absurdly meaningless all the arguments of maya truly are; he discovers that there is no place in the Atman for the mind, so full of sankalpa and vikalpa: will and doubt.

In the Atman there is no distinction between creator and created, nor the universe of cause and effect that follow upon that premise. In the realised man, the jiva does not exist as ahamkara. In the Atman there is no one bound, nor do any bonds exist. The Sage abides in this oceanic Atman, without ego, without any distraction.

This is, indeed, the condition of Vishnu, realised by those that reject the body and the ego as being their self. These bhaktas love God to the exclusion of everything else.

They come to Vishnu, who abandon the notion that they are the body and thus relinquish all sense of having possessions.

Never insult or humiliate anyone, and bear the insults of others gladly. Do not allow love for your own body to become the cause of bearing hatred toward other living beings.

I salute the Maharishi Krishna Dwaipayana, whose intellect is boundless, and by whose grace I have acquired this awesome *Bhagavata Purana*,' says Suta Ugrasravas, matchless raconteur.

The Rishi Saunaka asks, 'Holy one, into how many parts did Pala and Vyasa's other sishyas, those great protagonists of Vidya, divide the Vedas?'

The Suta said, 'When, once, Brahma Paramesthin sat in dhyana of the Brahman, Nada arose in the depths of his heart: unarticulated, immaculate sound. It was like the subtle sound one hears when one shuts one's ears.

Yogis meditate upon this Nada within their hearts and purify themselves of the three grossnesses: adhibhuta, adhyatma and adhidaiva, and they find moksha, which is beyond rebirth.

From the inarticulate Nada there arose Pranava, AUM, with its three syllables: a, u, and m. No one can find its root. AUM is the sound of the Final Being, who is Parabrahman, Paramatman and Bhagavan.

He that hears the immaculate AUM, without it being said aloud, without using any organ of hearing is not the jiva but the very Brahman. The Omkara, which was revealed in the depths of the heart by the Atman, is the origin of every other sound: the universe of sounds.

AUM reveals its own origin, the pervasive Paramatman. AUM is the essence of every Vedic mantra. It is the eternal seed of the Veda.

Bhrigudvaha, scion of the line of Bhrigu, the a, u, and m of Pranava are the foundations of sattva, raja and tamas; of rig, yajus and sama; of bhuloka, bhuvarloka and swarloka, and of sleep, waking and dream.

Out of AUM, Brahma created the spoken alphabet – the antasthas (ya, ra, la, va), the ushmas (ssa, sha, sa, ha), the swaras (that begin with a), the sparshas (from ka to ma), and the hrasvas and deerghas.

From these primal sounds, Brahma spoke the four Vedas, one from each of his faces. He also spoke the Vyaahritis and the articulate AUM, so that the four priests could perform Vedic yagnas in the world.

Brahma taught the Veda to his sons, Marichi and the others, who became masters of it, and taught it to their sons.

The Veda was propounded through the four yugas by the ascetic sishyas of the earliest Rishis, until, toward the end of the dwapara yuga, the Sages divided the Veda into further, smaller parts.

Inspired by the Lord within their hearts, the Brahmarishis divided the Veda into many branches, for they saw that men of the later ages had become shortlived, weak, and intellectually dull.

Muni, during the sovereignty of Vaivaswata Manu, upon being implored by Brahma and the Lokapalas, Narayana, Cause of causes, incarnated himself as the son of Parasara and Satyavati. He did this by using his sattva maya, in order to preserve dharma in a darkening world.

As collections of precious stones are separated by genre, Vyasa divided the one Veda into four texts, according to their generic variety of chanting: Rig, Yajus, Sama and Atharva.

Vyasa of prophetic vision, called his four sishyas and gave each of them one Vedasamhita, one collection of mantras.

The first samhita, called Bahvricha, consisted of the passages from the Rig. This, Vyasa imparted to his disciple Paila. The Yajus, consisting mainly of prose and its passages, called Nigada, he taught Vaisampayana.

Vyasa taught Jaimini the Saman text, which is sung according to their meter, Chchandoga. He instructed his sishya Sumantu in the Atharvana samhita, which is known as Atharvaangiraasi.

Now Paila divided his samhita in two and gave a half each to his sishyas Indrapramiti and Bashkala. Bashkala divided what he got in four and taught a quarter each to his sishyas Bodhya, Yajnavalkya, Parashara and Agnimitra.

Indrapramiti taught what he had learned, in entirety, to his knowledgeable son Mandukya, whose sishya Devamitra taught the samhita to Saubhari and others.

Mandukya's son, Sakalya, divided his text in five and taught a fifth to each of five sishyas – Vatsya, Mudgala, Saliya, Gokhalya and Sisira.

Saliya's sishya Jaratkaru divided his samhita in four, and taught a fourth part to each of his sishyas Balaka, Paija, Vaitala and Viraja. Jaratkaru also founded the subject known as Nirukta, which gives the meanings of and explains the words in the Veda.

Bashkala's son compiled a book called Valakhilya, which is a selection from all the Vedas. This he taught Balayani, Bhajya and Kasara.

All the samhitas mentioned are dominated by mantras from the Rig, and the Brahmarishis devote themselves to their study. Listening attentively to these frees a man from his sins.

Vaisampayana's main disciples were Charaka, Adhvaryu and some others, too. Charaka had his unusual name because he performed the rituals to exorcise the sin of Brahmahatya, on his Guru's behalf.

Hearing about this, Yajnavalkya, another sishya of Vaisampayana, said haughtily, "A mere trifle, this yagna! What it gives is hardly worth mentioning. I can perform far more difficult rituals."

His Guru became annoyed to hear the arrogance in Yajnavalkya's tone. He cursed his disciple: "Dare you insult your Guru? Leave me and be my sishya no more. Before you go, disgorge whatever you have learned from me!"

At which, Devarata's son Yajnavalkya spat out every mantra he had imbibed of the Yajus and stalked away. Later, some Rishis saw those Yajur mantras lying scattered upon the earth.

They were attracted by the luminous and subtle chants. They became tittiri birds, partridges, and swallowed the Yajur mantras. Thus, this rescension of the enchanting Yajur mantras became known as the Taittiriya samhita of the Yajur Veda.

Now, the enraged Yajnavalkya wanted to possess Vedic mantras that not even Vaisampayana knew. He worshipped Surya Deva.

Said Yajnavalkya:

"AUM Namo Bhagavate Adityaya Akhilajagatatamatma Svarupena Kaala Svarupena Chaturavidhabhutanayakanam...

AUM! I salute the Lord as Aditya. As the ubiquitous sky does, you dwell within the four kinds of beings, from Brahma down to the blade of grass – as the Atman and as Time.

You manifest yourself as the year and its divisions like kshana, lava, nimisha and the rest. You are the pervasive One, singular and by yourself. You draw up and store superfluous water, drawing it up along your rays, and send it down again as rain, when it is needed. You, adorable one, *Savitur varennyam,* keep the world alive.

Lord of all, Surya Narayana, you destroy sins, sufferings that accrue from sin, and the ignorance that causes sin in your bhaktas, who worship you by the Vedic way during the three sandhyas: at dawn, noon and dusk. I meditate upon you dwelling in your incandescent sphere in the sky.

O Surya, indweller, who animate the jiva's mind, its senses and pranas and spur the jiva to karma!

Lord, you look at the world like a corpse in the jaws of the serpent avidya, and moved by mercy, you awaken it with just your dazzling gaze.

Each day you stir all beings toward their salvation, which is to seek and discover their spiritual being, the Atman.

You course through the firmament like some great king across his kingdom and the Lokapalas all greet you with arghya in their palms cupped like lotus buds.

And thus, I, too, seek sanctuary at your feet, which even the masters of the three worlds worship. I beg you, Lord Surya, teach me the secret mantras of the Yajur Veda, which no one else knows in their true form."

When he was hymned and adored thus by Yajnavalkya, the Lord Surya appeared before that Sage in the form of a horse and revealed Yajur mantras to him that no one else had ever known.

The gifted Yajnavalkya divided that vast number of mantras into fifteen samhitas, rescensions. These are called Vajasinis, which means derived from the horse's mane, or obtained from the swift one. The Vajasinis were taught and studied among the brahmana lines of the Kaanvas and Maadhyandinas.

Jaimini, who was master of the Sama mantras, had a son called Sumantu, and a grandson named Sunvaan. He taught each of them one samhita of the Sama Veda.

Jaimini's disciple Susharma, who was a profound genius, created a thousand samhitas, which he gathered from the awesome tree that is the Sama Veda.

His sishyas – Hiranyanabha of Kosala and Poushyanji, and another disciple from Avanti – mastered the Sama samhitas.

These three taught five hundred students from the northern country to chant the Sama mantras. There were some sishyas from the east who learnt the Sama from those masters.

Poushyanji's five disciples, Laugakshi, Maangali, Kulya, Kusida and Kukshi, mastered a hundred samhitas, each, of the Sama mantras.

Hiranyanabha's disciple Krita taught twenty-four samhitas of the Veda to his sishyas; and the nameless sishya from Avanti, who was a master of his mind and his senses, imparted the rest of the samhitas to his disciples,' says Ugrasravas to the Rishis in the Naimisa vana.

THE PURANAS

SUTA CONTINUES, 'SUNATU WAS A MASTER OF THE ATHARVA, AND taught this recondite Veda to his sishya Kabandha. Kabandha divided the Atharva hymns into two samhitas and gave one to each of his two disciples, Pathya and Vedadarsha.

Vedadarsha divided what he received from his master in four and gave a fourth part to each of his four sishyas: Sauklayani, Brahmabali, Modosha and Pippalayani. Pathy's sishyas were Kumuda, Sunaka and Jajali, who, especially, was a master of the Atharva. He divided what he knew among these three.

Angiras' sishyas, Babhru and Saindhavayana, learnt both samhitas, as did their disciples, such as Savarni.

The main Acharyas of the Atharva Veda are Nakshatrakalpa, Shanti, Kashyapa, Angirasa, and there are others, too, Sages as great as these. Now let me tell you about the Puranas and those that are authorities on them.

Trayyaruina, Kashyapa, Savarni, Akritavrana, Vaisamapayana and Harita are the main experts on the Puranas.

Veda Vyasa made six compilations of all the Puranas and taught them to my father Romaharshana. My father taught each of the above Rishis one samhita. I, Ugrasravas, became a sishya of each of the six Munis and learnt the entire body of Puranas from them.

Kashyapa, Savarni, Parasurama's sishya Akritavarna and I learnt the four original samhitas from Vyasa Muni's disciple.

Let me tell you, O Brahmana, what the characteristics of a Purana are, as the Brahmarishis have determined them to be, by the light of the Veda and the other Shastras.

The learned say that a Purana has ten thematic divisions or lakshanas: Sarga, Visarga, Vritti, Raksha, Manvantaras, Vamshas, Vamshanucharita, Samstha, Hetu and Apasraya.

Some make a distinction between the Mahapuranas and the Upapuranas, the first being major and the latter the minor ones.

These say that the Mahapuranas have the ten lakshanas, while the Upapuranas have just five: Sarga, Pratisarga, Vamsa, Manvantara and Vamsanucharita.

Since the three gunas of Prakriti, and Mahatattva, lose their innate balance, Sarga describes the three kinds of Ahamkara, the Tanmatras, the Indriyas, the Devas and the Panchamahabhutas.

Visarga describes the continuum of the worlds and all their beings, sentient and otherwise, the constant flowering as of seed from seed, enabled by the Lord's power and by karma.

Vritti tells of the livelihood of beings that move. Vritti means the lives of such beings, by their natural inclinations, their desires, or by scriptural injunctions.

Rakhsa is protection; it describes the divine lila of the Avataras of the Lord in every yuga, among non-human species, among men, Rishis, and Devas, by which he preserves dharma and exterminates evil when it threatens to overwhelm creation.

A Manvantara is an epoch of time over which a Manu presides. He rules and influences the great era, and with him, the Devas, Indra, the Saptarishis and the incarnations. These see to the welfare of the worlds.

Vamsha deals with the genealogy of the sacred and pious royal lines born of Brahma: their past, present and future. Vamshanucharita is an account of the lives of the important kings born in each of these noble houses.

Samstha gives an account of the Pralaya, the dissolution of the worlds into their essential elements; it describes the four kinds of Pralaya – Naimittika, Prakrita, Nitya and Atyantika.

Hetu, which means the cause of Creation, tells of the Jiva, who is prey to desire and karma, which arise from avidya, ignorance. Some say that the Jiva is Anusayi, consciousness enjoying every tendency that karma generates. Others call him Avyakrita, unmanifest.

Apasraya is the Brahman, the final Sanctuary, who is the pervasive foundation of the three conditions of sleep, waking and dream: all these created by Maya. When these three kinds of consciousness are eliminated in the communion of samadhi, what remains is the Brahman, their uttermost negation.

The Apasraya Brahman is the Satchitananda Parabrahman. His is the support, the essence of all things: when everything else ceases to be, He alone continues to exist: the immutable Origin.

When the mind ceases to assume the three states – sleep, waking and dream – either naturally, or through Yoga, the ensuing fourth condition can intuit the Brahman, the substratum, and become free from samsara, the karma kshetra.

The Rishis who knew the most ancient tradition tell of there being eighteen Puranas, great and lesser.

The eighteen are the Brahma, the Padma, the Vishnu, the Siva, the Linga, the Garuda, the Narada, this Bhagavata, the Agni, the Skanda, the Bhavishya, the Brahmavaivarta, the Markandeya, the Varaha, the Matsya, the Kuurma, and the Brahmanda Puranas.

Muni, this was how the disciples of Vyasa and their disciples divided the Veda into many samhitas. One's brahmajyoti, spiritual aura, in enriched by listening to this account,' says the Suta Ugrasravas.

THE GREATNESS OF MARKANDEYA

SAUNAKA SAYS, 'HOLY SUTA, LONG MAY YOU LIVE! BE PLEASED, O incomparable Pauranika, to tell us more about the Lord; take us beyond darkness and into light.

Mrikanda's son Markandeya lives forever. Even when every other beings perished at the end of the last Kalpa, he did not die. How was this?

In this Kalpa, he has been born into our own clan, as a jewel in the line of Bhrigu. However, this Kalpa has not yet known its Pralaya to test the truth of his immortality.

We heard that when all was a single sea of dissolution, Ekarnava, Markandeya floundered alone upon those waters of the Deluge and he saw a pipal leaf floating on those waters, and upon it lay the most wondrous Infant.

Suta, we doubt what we hear, and are eager to know the real truth about this legend. Great Yogin, master of the Purana, clear this doubt for us.'

Suta says, 'Maharishi, your question shall benefit the world, for the answer to it, a story of Narayana, cleanses the filth of kali yuga.

Markandeya received the samskaras of a dvija, the purifying rituals of a twiceborn, from his father. He imbibed the Veda, kept austerity, observed dharma and practised tapasya.

He kept perfect brahmacharya, wore jata, valkala, the skin of an antelope, a girdle of kusa grass, the sacred thread, carried a brahmana's danda, a kamandalu and prayer beads. He worshipped Hari at dawn and sunset, in Agni, Surya, his Guru, in Rishis and in the Atman.

Each day, he begged alms, offered what he got first to his Guru, and only then silently ate what remained, if his preceptor allowed him to eat. When his master did not say that he could eat, Markandeya fasted.

Reciting the Veda every day, observing every austerity, he lived a life of worship for years beyond count, and thus conquered death itself.

Brahma, Bhrigu, Parameshwara, Daksha and the other Prajapatis, who are Brahma's sons, men, Devas, the Pitrs all saw what Markandeya had achieved and were amazed.

With his mind completely purified by brahmacharya, tapasya, the Veda and self-control, the Mahayogin meditated upon Him who is beyond the senses.

Six Manvantaras passed, with Markandeya plunged in immaculate dhyana.

When Markandeya's tapasya extended into the seventh Manvantara, the Indra of that epoch became anxious that the Sage might take his sovereignty from him, and become Indra in his place.

To tempt him away from his fervid penance, Indra sent Gandharvas, Apsaras, Kama Deva, Vasantha, soft Malaya breezes, and Greed and Pride, who are the children of rajas.

These came to Markandeya's asrama, set in a northern valley of the Himalaya, where the river Pushpabhadra flowed beside the rock of legend known as Chitra.

A fair number of Rishis lived in that most sacred hermitage, where fine trees of the eldest strains grew, entwined by delicate creepers. Crystalline lakes sparkled in the verdant tapovana.

Honeybees, drunk on nectar, filled that valley with their intoxicated humming; the sweet songs of kokilas filled one's ears, and one's eyes feasted upon the most exquisite sights – the mating of colourful birds in the trees, peacocks dancing for the joy of being alive, their brilliant tails unfurled.

The breeze that softly swept the secret valley was cooled by the waterdrops of the many falls that fell down its sides; it was fragrant with the embrace of flowers. Men's hearts quickened to love here.

Spring, Vasantha, arrived there, and the twilight sky was adorned by the tilaka of the rising moon. The natural world, tree, bush and vine, seemed to embrace with green arms of branch and leaf. Fresh sprouts and shoots caressed scented flower bunches.

Kama arrived there, leading a bevy of celestial nymphs, their beauty and seductiveness past describing; he came with his sugarcane bow in his hands and followed by a troupe of Gandharva minstrels, playing unearthly songs on their fine instruments.

Indra's agents saw Markandeya, who sat before his sacrificial fire, his eyes shut, lost in dhyana. He had just finished offering oblations to that agni. He was so lustrous that he looked like Agni Deva himself!

The Apsaras began to dance before the meditating Sage, to the tunes and songs of the Gandharva musicians, who played on vina, panava and mridanga, and sang in voices for which, also, there is no description, so enchanting were they.

Kama aimed his five-pronged arrow at Markandeya, while Indra's other messengers, Spring and the Passions, joined the Love God in his effort to seduce the Muni from his tapasya.

An Aspara called Punjikasthali began playing with a ball. Her waist was so slender it seemed it would break from the weight of her full breasts. As she chased that magical ball, her tresses came loose; the flowers woven into her hair fell free.

Her eyes shining, she pursued the ball, which darted about, bouncing with a will of its own. Suddenly, the girdle she wore came loose and the breeze plucked the diaphanous cloth she wore and carried it away, leaving her naked.

Kama saw his moment and loosed his five-headed shaft at the Sage in dhyana. To no avail, for it glanced off him, as did all the others the Love God shot in fair frenzy. His subtle archery, with flower arrows, was like all the efforts of a man whom God has not blessed – in vain.

Then, the spiritual aura of Markandeya blazed forth, threatening to incinerate Kama and his allies. They fled from there like children that have roused a sleeping cobra.

Yet, most wonderful to behold was that Makandeya felt no anger, showed no trace of annoyance, even, against these Indradutas who sought to distract him. But we know that this lack of rage is not surprising in such a Mahatma.

Meanwhile, Indra, watching all this, was both wonderstruck by the Rishi's spiritual prowess, and crestfallen at the failure and flight of his agents of seduction.

Markandeya communed uninterruptedly with Vishnu – with tapasya, restraint and Vedic mantras. Hari appeared before that Sage as the divine Nara Narayana.

Nara was fair and Narayana was dark; their eyes were large and soft as the petals of a grown lotus in bloom; each had four arms; they were very tall and wore deerskin, valkala and a three-stringed sacred thread.

In their hands they had the pavitra, kamandalus, straight staves of bamboo, rosaries of lotus beads, cloth whisks to keep insects away, and fistfuls of kusa grass that were symbols of the Veda. The two Rishis, whom even the Devas worship, were like tapasya embodied: such was their lustre, like the brilliance of lightning.

Markandeya saw the twin vision of Nara Narayana before him and rose. With great devotion, he prostrated in sashtanga namaskara, laying himself at their feet like a stick of wood.

His heart was full of rare bliss, and sublime peace suffused his body, his senses and his mind. His hair standing on end for joy, tears streamed from his eyes so the divine forms before him were blurred.

Then, rising, his hands folded humbly, he approached them as if he would embrace them in ecstasy. Instead, he cried fervently, in sheer adoration, "Ah, salutations to you! Salutations to you! Salutations to you both!"

He made them sit on darbhasanas, washed their feet, and worshipped them with offerings of precious unguents and garlands of wildflowers.

When they seemed comfortable and at their ease, he prostrated before them again. Then Markandeya spoke to Nara Narayana, as to a single Being.

"O Pervasive One! How do I hymn your greatness? You animate every being: Brahma, Parameshwara and me, too. Your power makes us speak and act, feel and think. And though you are the Paramatman, you become the dearest friend and the love of those that surrender to you.

You have assumed this twin form just as you became the Matsya, Kuurma and the other Avataras, to protect the worlds, to relieve suffering and to save jivas. Not only do you nurture the worlds, like a spider you spin the web of the universe and also withdraw it into yourself, with no effort.

I worship the holy feet of that Being who is the Lord of everything that moves and does not; to whom jivas surrender and are set free from the taint of karma, the gunas and time; to attain whom Munis that know the Veda chant mantras, perform namaskara, and practise bhakti and dhyana.

For men, whom death stalks everywhere, each moment, there is no other refuge but your sacred feet. When two Paraardhas end, death overtakes even Brahma. What then to say of Brahma's creatures?

And so I worship you, whose will is truth, who are enlightened and transcendent. For, when a man abandons attachment for his body and all that goes with it, which are meaningless, without substance, mortal and no more than in name, and which obscure his spiritual splendour, he finds All that he seeks.

Lord, you are the nearest kinsman! In divine sport you create, preserve and destroy the universe with the three gunas; but only your lila of the sattva guna brings the peace of moksha. Rajas and tamas fetch only sorrow, delusion and fear to men.

Thus do the Munis adore this sattvika form of yours, O Nara Narayana, and conceive of your bhaktas of being sattvik, too. For the great bhaktas say that the Paramatman is pure Sattva; that Vaikuntha is formed of Sattva, and only in Sattva the condition of bliss, which is without fear, is experienced.

I salute you, the Bhagavata Purusha, Viswa, Viswaguru, Paradevata! O Narayana, greatest of Rishis, and Nara, most perfect of men, master of the senses, pristine and pure One.

You are the innate sovereign of the senses, of prana, buddhi and all the objects of perception; yet as long as maya deludes the mind, the mind does not see you. But when you, the Jagadguru, enlighten the same mind, it finds you intuitively, at once.

The Veda can bestow this final intuition, of the Atman. Without this direct experience, the quest of all the seers, even Brahma, is in vain. I salute you, Mahapurusha, who reveals yourself through all the scriptures and theologies, but whose true Nature is hidden by the maya of the false self: the mind and body!"

Markandeya said,' says Ugrasravas.

MARKANDEYA'S VISION

THE SUTA CONTINUES, 'PLEASED BY HIS HYMN, THE LORD, WHO HAD come as Nara Narayana, spoke to that scion of Bhrigu's clan.

Said Sri Bhagavan, "Brahmarishi! You have attained the highest spiritual goal through your dhyana, your bhakti towards me and by your self-control and austerity; you have found samadhi with the Atman.

We are pleased by your perfect brahmacharya. We bless you! Choose your boon and you shall have anything, for I am the foremost among the granters of boons."

The Rishi Markandeya said, "Devadevesha, Lord of Gods, One without decay! What greater boon can there be than you appearing thus before me?

Brahma and the other Great Ones see you with their mind's eye after long tapasya; but you have come to me so that I see you with my eyes.

But, Lord, I have one wish: I want to experience your Yogamaya, by whose delusion the worlds perceive duality in your Single Being." '

Suta says, 'Muni, Nara Narayana granted Markandeya's unusual prayer, and returned to Badarikasrama, where they dwell. They went smiling, for those that worship Narayana usually ask for freedom from maya, but here was a Sage who asked to experience maya!

Markandeya stayed on in his asrama, thinking about the Lord's promise that he would experience Yogamaya.

He worshipped God in the Fire, the Sun, Moon, Water, Air; in ethereal Akasa and the Atman. He meditated upon the Lord as the Antaryamin. He made offerings that he imagined to the Lord; but, at times, he was so overwhelmed by divine love that he forgot entirely to perform these rituals.

Most learned Rishi of Bhrigu's line, one evening as Markandeya sat upon the banks of the river Pushpabhadra, an unprecedented storm began to blow.

The wind howled, and black clouds filled the sky and were rent by thunder and lightning. The rain came down in streams as thick as the boles of trees.

The seas rose and flooded the Earth, until all land was covered by water.

The rain continued and the ocean rose into the sky. Ferocious winds and immense streaks of lightning threatened Markandeya from without, and fear from within. That Muni lost his composure and trembled to see the world submerged.

He looked up and saw the Deluge overwhelm the firmament, too; all the Dwipas were under water.

Bhumi, Patala, Swarga and all the Mandalas sank; Markandeya drifted alone upon those terrifying waters. He was like a man blind drunk, his jata hanging loose.

Tormented by hunger and thirst, terrified by the denizens of the sea, and by the tides that still swept the Ocean, he drifted, exhausted; and all around him was pitch blackness, and he could see nothing: not land, not the sky, not the quarters or directions.

Whirlpools seized him; waves smashed him unconscious; sea creatures big and small bit him, vied to devour him; tides of grief swept over him, and delusion, searing pain, pleasure as well, dread diseases, the terror of death: all these. Thus, he floundered upon the waters of the Pralaya.

Caught in Mahavishnu's maya, Markandeya felt he ranged the sea of the deluge for thousands and thousands of cosmic years.

Suddenly, he spied a splendid pipal tree; it stood upon a promontory of its own, full of lush new leaves and fruit.

Gazing, the Muni saw that upon a leaf that grew from a north-eastern branch of that tree, there lay an infant whose lustre dispelled the darkness of the Pralaya.

The child was dark green, like an emerald. He was beautiful, his face like a lotus in bloom. His nose was perfect; his brows were high and arched.

His chest was broad, his neck like a sankha, and his shining locks seemed to wave even like a sea as he breathed. He wore pomegranate flowers in ears formed like the inside of a seashell.

His lips were red as corals and lit by a dazzling smile full of glory. The corners of his eyes were crimson, like the inside of a lotus, and he glanced around him, smiling all the while.

His belly was as flat as a pipal leaf, marked by three folds, a deep navel, and it throbbed with the pulsating life of his prana. His hand and fingers were exquisite. Such was the wondrous Infant that the Rishi saw lying upon the pipal leaf, and the child sucked avidly upon the big toes of his feet, both of which he had in his mouth.

Markandeya looked at this child and his exhaustion and fear melted away. He trembled for rapture now; the lotuses that were the Sage's eyes and the one that was his heart bloomed. Though wonderstruck, Markandeya went toward the Infant to speak to him.

But when he went near, the Rishi was sucked into the Infant's body along with his breath, as if he were some microbe. And when he was inside the Child, Markandeya was rooted – he saw the entire universe there, exactly as it had been before the Pralaya!

The Muni saw the sky, the heavens, the earth, the galaxies, mountains, seas, islands, continents, the quarters, the Devas and Asuras, forests, villages, rivers, cities, quarries, fields, cowsheds, the varnas and asramas, the Panchamhabhuta and their evolutes.

Markandeya saw the yugas, Kalpas, Kaala Himself: why, he saw everything that the universe ever contains, within the body of the magical and holy Infant.

He saw the Himalaya and the river Pushpabhadra; he saw his own asrama and all the Rishis that lived in the tapovana. Even as he watched all this, the Infant exhaled and the Muni found himself expelled from its body and afloat again upon the waters of the Deluge.

Again, he saw the pipal tree on the outcrop of land, and the Child lying upon his leaf. The Infant glanced sideways at the Sage and smiled his divine and dazzling smile. This was the dark child upon whom Markandeya used to meditate in his heart. Now he saw that Holy Child with his eyes and once more went towards him, to embrace him.

The Child, the Lord who bestows the fruit of all tapasya, the Antaryamin, vanished before the Muni's eyes – just like the hopes of a luckless man.

At once, the pipal tree and the ocean of the Pralaya also disappeared, and Markandeya found himself back on the banks of the river in his asrama, sitting in dhyana as before!' the Suta Ugrasravas tells the Rishis of the Naimisa vana.

MARKANDEYA AND SIVA

SUTA SAYS, 'THUS, MARKANDEYA EXPERIENCED THE POWER AND mystery of the Yogamaya of Narayana. He sought sanctuary in the Lord.

Said Markandeya, "Hari! I seek refuge at your lotus feet, for your maya deludes even the wisest man. All man's gyana is mere avidya before what you are."

Once Siva crossed the sky upon Nandiswara, with Uma and his ganas with him. He saw Markandeya rapt in dhyana.

Uma saw the Muni and said to Siva, "Lord, look how he sits utterly absorbed, with body, mind and senses still.

He is like a sea becalmed, with its water, winds and creatures unmoving. You are the granter of boons; give this Rishi the fruit of his tapasya."

Sri Bhagavan said, "This Brahmarishi wants no boon, not even mukti! He has found Parabhakti, the highest devotion, and such a man has no desires.

Yet, Bhavani, let us go and meet this holy one; for there is no greater fortune than meeting one like him."

And Siva, sanctuary of all Yogins, master of jivas, who spreads all the arts and sciences, approached the Sage.

Lost in samadhi, Markandeya was oblivious of the arrival of Siva and Parvati, who are the soul of the universe and its sovereigns. He was oblivious of the very universe and his own existence.

Siva, Lord of mountains, Sovereign of the universe, understood Markandeya's samadhi; just as air seeps into a room through the smallest aperture, he entered into the firmament of the Sage's heart.

Suddenly, in his dhyana, Markandeya saw the Lord, with fulvid jata bright as lightning, three-eyed, ten-armed, and shining like the rising sun.

Siva carried a trident, his mace the Khatvanga, a rosary of rudraksha beads, a dumaru, a skull and a bow.

Markandeya saw him refulgent and woke from his samadhi, wondering, "Hah! Who is this? How has he come here?"

Opening his eyes, he saw Siva and Parvati before him, surrounded by their ganas. The Muni prostrated before the Lord and welcomed him with padya, arghya, fragrant chandana, pushpamala, dhoopa, and an asana upon which to sit.

Said Markandeya, "Lord, what can I do for you, who are the source of bliss for the world, who are perfect and contented in yourself?

I salute Lord Siva, who embodies peace. You are awesome in your terrific Form of rajas and tamas; yet, in truth, you are the Gentlest One. I prostrate before you whose nature is sattva and who bestows joy to the worlds!"

When Markandeya hymned him thus, Siva, First of Gods, Lord of Everything, the goal of Yogis, was pleased.

Smiling, Sri Bhagavan Siva said, "Ask me for whatever boon you want. We, the Trimurti, greatest among boongivers, can give you even moksha. And a vision of any of us always bears fruit.

The worlds and the Lokapalas honour and adore holy brahmanas who are serene, detached, worshippers of solitude, equal-minded and loving toward all creatures, free from hatred, and devout.

Why, I myself, Brahma and the Lord Hari revere such Sages.

These bhaktas see no difference between Brahma, the invincible Vishnu and me. You see all beings as being part of the same single Self; and so, even we, the Trimurti, honour you.

Sacred are the tirthas, and not mere water bodies; holy are the idols of the Gods, and not mere stones. Yet, these take a long time to purify a man, while just the sight of Rishis like you purifies him in a moment.

Salutations to you holy ones, of meditation, penance, understanding, restraint and calm, who contain us Gods within you in the form of the Veda!

Seeing you and listening to you purifies even the lowest-born. What, then, can be said of actually conversing with you?"

The words of the Lord with the Moon in his hair – the cornerstones of dharma – were like amrita to Markandeya's ears; and he could not have enough of listening to them.

For so long he had endured the torment of Vishnu's maya, and now Siva's speech was balm, nectar. His suffering removed, the Muni spoke to Siva.

Markandeya said, "It is passing strange when the Gods that rule the fates of men give praise to those whose lives they control!

Yet, it is true that, frequently, the Gurus of dharma teach it by example and even by giving praise and worshipping men that practise it.

Just as a magician's illusions do not affect him, a Jagadguru saluting his sishya does not affect the Master's divinity.

The dreamer himself projects his dreams and watches them from within. The Lord projects the universe as his dream and enters into it. He is always a witness, but gives the impression that he is a participant, like the dreamer.

I worship the Lord of whom this universe is comprised as the three gunas; who is yet immutable, unlike the jiva, and always a witness. I salute the Jagadguru, the Singular and infinite Brahman.

What boon, other than seeing you with my eyes, shall I seek from you, Lord whose vision sets one free?

Yet, there is one boon I will ask you for, O Perfect One, who are without desire, but who shower your bhaktas with everything they want. O Siva, may I always have unwavering devotion for you, for Sri Hari, and for all your devotees."

Hearing these sweet words, and with Parvati's concurrence, Siva blessed the Rishi:

"Maharishi, you shall have everything that you have asked for, and, further, I bless you that you shall live, without dying, until the very Kalpa ends, and immortal fame shall be yours.

You shall be a Trikalagyani, have Brahmavigyana and Virakti. You shall be an enlightened one and a master of the Puranas."

Having thus blessed the Muni, Siva described to Uma the tapasya of Markandeya and how he had experienced Vishnu's maya. Then Siva and Parvati vanished from that place.

And Markandeya, immortal scion of the line of Bhrigu, attained the renown of a Mahayogi. He had perfect bhakti for Sri Hari, and he ranges across the universe to this very day.

This is the story of Markandeya, and how he experienced the power of Vishnu's maya.

The truth is that the Lord Vishnu created the entire experience of the Pralaya, of appearing as the Infant upon the pipal leaf, and of Markandeya passing into and out of the Sacred child's body. He created that experience that appeared to last seven Kalpas just for the Sage. Only the ignorant think of the experience of Markandeya as having actually been of a Pralaya or of having lasted seven real Kalpas.

Bhriguvarya, whoever tells or listens to this legend of the Lord's maya shall have their every desire fulfilled. They will find mukti from the wheel of samsara, of births and deaths that is caused by the effects of karma," says Suta Ugrasravas to the Rishis in the Naimisa vana.

VISWARUPA

SAUNAKA SAID, "MASTER OF KNOWLEDGE, WE HAVE ANOTHER QUESTION for you, who know the Tantras well.

The knowers of Tantra have ascribed a physical form, qualities, weapons and adornments to the Lord of Sri, who in truth is pure Consciousness, Chitta.

We are anxious to hear about the ritual worship that the Tantras prescribe, by which a man can attain immortality."

Suta said, "I bow to my Gurus, and I will tell you about the glory of the Lord Vishnu taught by masters like Brahma and others, through the Veda and the Tantras.

The Cosmic Form of the Lord, which is called Virat, has nine aspects – Prakriti, Sutratma, Mahatattva, Ahamkara, and the five Tanmatras. Virat is founded in Chitta, pristine Consciousness.

The Virata is based upon Brahman, and is embodied as Purusha. The Earth is his feet; Heaven, his head; the Sky, his navel; the Sun, his eyes; Air, his nose, and the Four Quarters are his ears.

Prajapati is his sexual organ; Mrityu is his anus; the Lokapalas are his arms; the Moon is his mind, and Yama is his eyebrows.

Bashfulness is his upper lip, greed the lower one; light is his teeth, maya his smile; tree are his hairs, the clouds his locks.

Just as men are seven times as tall as the span of their palms, the Virat is seven spans of his cosmic hand. Whatever organs, limbs and members are found in the human body, the Virat also possesses, in cosmic dimensions.

The Kaustubha is, in fact, the pristine Chitta in the jiva; while the Srivatsa is the spreading lustre of the individual soul.

The Vanamala is maya; the Pitambara robe is the Veda, and the sacred thread of three strands that the Lord wears is AUM, Pranava of three syllables.

Samkhya and Yoga are his fish-shaped earrings; the crown upon his head is Satyaloka, higher than every other world.

Ananta, the infinite Serpent upon which he rests, is Avyaakrita – primeval, undivided Prakriti. The Lotus in which he sits is the sattva guna; its petals are dharma, gyana and the other pure qualities.

The Kaumodaki is air, prana; Panchajanya is water; the Sudarshana Chakra is fire.

His blue-edged sword is akasa; his shield, tamas, is darkness. His bow, Saringa, is time, and his quiver is the gathering of karma.

His arrows are the indriyas; his chariot is the mind, driven by the will; his power to manifest is the Tanmatras, and the mudras he makes with his hands bestow blessings and gifts.

He is worshipped in the orb of the Sun; one must receive initiation and a mantra from a Guru in order to worship him. Serving the Lord Vishnu wipes away one's every sin, and the very disposition to sin.

The lotus in his hand signifies the six divine powers – aishwarya, which is sovereignty, and the rest. The two chamaras, the ceremonial fans on either side of him are Dharma and Yasas, which is glory.

Dvijas, the royal parasol unfurled over him, signifies Vaikuntha, where there is only bliss and no fear. The Lord is called Yagna; his form is Yagna and he flies on Garuda, who embodies the three Vedas.

Vishnu is not apart from Sri. She is Shakti, the manifesting power of Hari. His main attendant Viswaksena embodies the Tantras. His eight dwarapalakas, headed by Nanda, are embodiments of the eight great siddhis, anima, mahima and the rest.

Vaasudeva, Samkarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha are four aspects of the Single Purusha, the Brahman. They are his four Vyuhas.

He is also Viswa, Taijasa, Parjna and Turiya – manifesting as the universe, the senses, ignorance and as the Witness.

He sustains the four Vyuhas with their distinctive features – Anga, Upanga, Akalpa and Ayudha, but remains transcendent, unaffected by these.

Dvijarishabha, He is Brahmayoni, the source of the Veda, Self-illumined, complete and immaculate in Himself, realised by intuition within themselves by those that seek him. He creates, sustains and destroys the universe with his maya, assuming three aspects, which in truth are always One unseen Spirit, whose lustre is never dimmed.

Sri Krishna, friend to Arjuna, Vrishnirishabha, who were as a forest fire to the tyrants of the Earth! Govinda, whose fame the gopis sing, as do the Rishis that are your bhaktas. Bless us, your bhaktas, and protect us, Lord, forever, O you whose very name is a blessing to humankind!

He that wakes in the morning and fixes his mind in dhyana upon the Lord, and chants these verses that describe the significance of his manifest form and attributes will find him, who is the Antaryamin in every heart."

Saunaka said, "Sri Suka said to the absorbed Raja Parikshit that a group of seven, which changes from month to month, journeys with the Sun. Tell me about them: their names and their functions, and who their leaders are.

Tell me also about Surya Narayana who is Sri Hari himself."

Suta said, "Surya Deva, who preserves life on Earth, is a manifestation of the power of Hari, the indweller. He spins round, doing the work of the Lord.

Surya is the root and the law of all three Vedas. Hari is the soul of the Sun; the Rishis speak of many Gods that are to be worshipped, in the Veda; they are all manifestations of Hari.

Hari, the Brahman, is said to have nine forms for the Vedic ritual – time, place, deed, agent, means, effect, scripture, substance and fruit.

To sustain life on Earth, Bhagavan as Kaala, manifest as the Sun, moves through twelve months, beginning with Chaitra, and through twelve constellations, his confederates.

Chaitra is ruled by a group of the Sun's confederates called Dhata. They are the Apsara Kritasthali, the Rakshasa Heti, the Naga Vasuki, the Yaksha Rathakrit, the Rishi Pulastya, and the Gandharva Tumburu.

The month Vaisakha is ruled by Aryama, Pulaha Rishi, the Yaksha Athoujas, the Rakshasa Praheti, the Apsara Punjikasthali, the Gandharva Narada, and the Naga Kachchaneera.

The rulers of the month Jyeshta are Mitra, Rishi Atra, the Rakshasa Pourusheya, the Naga Takshaka, the Apsara Menaka, the Gandharva Hahaa, and the Rakshasa Rathasvana.

Ashadha is ruled by Vasishta Muni, Varuna, Rambha, Sahajanya Yaksha, Huhoo Gandharva, Sukra Naga and the Rakshasa Chitrasvana.

Sravana's sovereigns are Indra, Viswavasu Gandharva, Srota Yaksha, Elaapatra Naga, the Muni Angiras, the Apsara Pramlocha, and Varya Rakshasa.

Bhaadrapada's rulers are the Aditya Vivaswan, Ugrasena Gandharva, Vyaaghra Rakshasa, Aasaarana Yaksha, Bhrigu Muni, Anumlocha Apsara and the Naga Shankhapaala.

Magha maasa's sovereigns are the Aditya Pooshaa, Dhanajaya Naga, Vaata Rakshasa, Sushena Gandharva, Suruchi Yaksha, the Apsara Ghritachi and the Muni Gautama.

Phalguna is directed by Kratu Yaksha, Varchas Rakshasa, Rishi Bharadwaja, Parjannya Aditya, Senajit Apsara, Viswa Gandharva and the Naga Airavata.

Margasirsha is guided by the Aditya Amsu, Rishi Kshyapa, Taarkshya Yaksha, Ritasena Gandharva, Urvashi, Vidyuchchatru Rakshasa and Mahashankha Naga.

Pushyami's rulers are Bhagaditya, Sphurja Rakshasa, Arishtanemi Gandharva, Oorna Yaksha, Rishi Ayu, Karkotaka Naga and the Apsara Purvachitti.

Aswina is governed by Tvashtar, Jamadagni, Kambala Naga, Tilottama, Brahmapetaa Rakshasa, Satajita Yaksha and the Gandharva Dhritarashtra.

The rulers of Kartika are Vishnu Aditya, Asvatara Naga, Rambha, Suryavarchas Gandharva, Satyajita Yaksha, Rishi Viswamitra, and the Rakshasa Mahapeta.

They that meditate upon these aspects of the Lord Surya Narayana at dawn and dusk shall be set free from their sins.

The Sun moves through these twelve signs in twelve months, with these servitors, and turns the minds of created beings towards the Spirit.

While they orbit, the Rishis hymn the Lord Surya with mantras from the Veda. The Gandharvas sing and the Apsaras dance for him.

The Nagas keep the wheels of his chariot on firm course; the Yakshas harness his celestial steeds. The mighty Rakshasas give impetus to his chariot, pushing it from behind.

Sixty thousand holy thumb-sized Brahmanas, the Valakhilyas, precede the progress of the Sun's ratha, facing him and singing his praises.

Thus, the Lord Hari, birthless, deathless, the eternal One, assumes many forms, from Kalpa to Kalpa, to protect the worlds.'

THE SKANDHAS OF THE *BHAGAVATA PURANA*

SUTA SAYS, '*NAMO DHARMAYA MAHATE NAMAH KRISHNAYAH VEDHASE; Brahmanyebhyo Namaskritya Dharmaan Vakshye Santanaan.*

I salute dharma; I salute Krishna, arbiter of destinies. I salute all Brahmanas, and now I will speak about the Sanatana Dharma, the Law Eternal.

Best of men, you first asked me what scripture is best for men to hear, sing and remember, and I narrated the marvels of Vishnu to you.

This scripture hymns the true God Hari, who destroys all sins. He is Narayana, Hrishikesha, Bhagavan, and the lord of the Sattvatas.

I told you about the Parabrahman, the hidden truth who causes the changing universe. We spoke of the knowledge and attainment of God: the theory and practice of the quest.

I spoke of Bhakti yoga, and the detachment and peace that come with it. You heard the tales of Parikshit and Narada.

I described Rajarishi Parikshit's prayopavesha, after he was cursed by a brahmana, and then how he met with the Brahmanarishabha Suka Deva.

In the second skandha of the Bhagavata, we spoke of what happens to those that die in Yoga; Narada and Brahma conversed about the Avataras of the Lord, and then, the sarga of the evolution of Pradhana.

Then Vidura conversed with Uddhava, and later Maitreya discoursed to Vidura. Here, they discussed the origins of the Bhagavatam, and described Narayana slumbering upon the ocean of Dissolution.

Then came the third sarga: the stirring of Prakriti, and the seven evolutes of the imbalance of the gunas. From these seven, the Cosmic Egg is formed and the Vairaja Purusha appears.

We described sukshma and sthula kaala, and the birth of the Lotus of the world. We saw the Earth being installed in her place and the slaying of Hiranyaksha.

Then, the origin of the species, of the Rudras, of Ardhanarinara and of Svayambhuva Manu;

The birth of Satarupa, the first woman, and the most perfect one in nature; the sons and daughters of Kardama Prajapati and their generations;

The Incarnation of the Lord as Kapila, the great-souled; and his discourse to his mother Devahuti.

The fourth skandha discussed the birth of the nine Prajapatis; the devastation of Daksha's yagna; the legends of Dhruva the pure, of Prithu; and Prachinabarhis.

The fifth skandha saw the lives and times of the Rajarishis Priyavrata, Naabhi, Rishabha and Bharata.

The great islands, their continents, the oceans, mountains, rivers, the heavens and galaxies, the realms of patala and naraka we saw described here.

In the sixth skandha, we saw the birth of Daksha as the son of Prachetas and the daughters of Daksha; also, you heard about the origin of the Devas, Asuras, men, animals, serpents and birds.

The seventh book describes the legend of Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyapu, and the life and devotion of Prahlada.

The eighth and ninth books tell of the Manvantaras; of Gajendra moksha; the different Avataras in the various Manvantaras, and of Hayagriva;

Of the Kuurma, of Dhanvantari, Matsya and Vamana; of the churning of the sea for the amrita;

Of the Devasura yuddha; it tells of the genealogy of the kings of Earth; of the birth of Ikshvaku and his descendants; the tale of Sudyumna;

Of Ila and Tara; of the dynasty of the Sun, into which Sasada, Nriga and others were born;

The stories of Sukanya, Saryati, Kakutstha, Mandhata, Saubhari and Sagara;

The legend of Rama of Kosala, which consumes every sin; of how Nimi gave up his body; of the advent of the Janakas;

Of the razing of the kshatriyas by Parasurama of the line of Bhrigu; the tales of Pururavas, Yayati and Nahusha of the House of the Moon; of Dushyanta's son Bharata, of Shantanu and Bheeshma, as well as the line of Yayati's older brother Yadu.

The tenth skandha tells of the birth of Krishna, Jagadiswara, in Vasudeva's prison cell and of his being taken to Gokula;

Of his marvellous deeds and the Asuras he slew – Putana and Shakatasura;

Of the slaying of Trinavarta, Baka, Vatsasura, Dhenuka and Pralamba;

Of how he protected the gopas from the forest fire; of the humbling of Kaliya; of how he rescued Nanda from Aghasura;

How the gopis kept a vrata to win Krishna's love; how he blessed the brahmanas' wives, and of the brahmanas' remorse and penitence;

Of the lifting of Govardhana; Indra worshipping Krishna and Surabhi giving him a ritual bath; of the Lord's raasalila with the gopis;

Of the slaying of Sankhchuda, Arishta and Kesin; of Akrura's arrival in Vraja and how Rama and Krishna went away to Mathura;

Of the lament of the gopis in Vraja; Krishna's advent in Mathura; the killing of Kuvalayapida, Chanura and Mushtika; the slaying of Kamsa;

Of how Guru Sandipani's dead children were restored to him; the rehabilitation of the Yadavas, the razing of the many armies of Jarasandha;

Of Kalayavana being killed by Muchukunda; of the move of the Yadavas from Mathura to Dwaraka;

Of the Sudharma and the Parijata being brought to Dwaraka; of Krishna's marriage to Rukmini and the defeat of the enemy kings in Kundinapura;

Hara paralysed in battle; Banasura's arms severed;

Of the slaying of Narakasura, lord of Pragjyitishapura; of the rescue of the women he kept as his captives there;

Of the slaying of Sishupala, Poundraka, Salva, Dantavakra, Sambara, Dvividha,' Pitha, Mura, Panchajana and others; of the burning of Kasi; of how Krishna removes the burdens of the Earth through the Pandavas;

The eleventh book speaks of how Krishna destroys his own clan through the curse of the brahmanas; it tells in detail of the Lord's luminous discourse to Uddhava; and of how Krishna leaves this world, taking his body out of it.

The twelfth, this final skandha discusses the nature of the yugas; the decay of humankind in the kali yuga; the four kinds of Pralaya; and the three kinds of creation after these;

We saw the death of Parikshit, after he heard the Bhagavata; how Vyasa Muni divided the Veda; the legend of Markandeya; the symbolism contained in the Lord's manifest from; and finally, the movement of Surya through different constellations, during the twelve months of the years.

Dvijyeshta, eldest of the twice-born, these are the answers to your questions, and the Lord's lila dominates them all.

Even if a man cries out "O Hari!" inadvertently, while he stumbles or falls, or when he faces danger, grief or sickness, he shall be set free from his sins.

Even as the sun dissipates darkness, or a strong wind blows clouds away, the Lord, the Infinite One, illumines the hearts of those that sing hymns to him or listen to his legends; he puts an end to their sorrows.

Works of literature that do not speak of God, the lord of the senses, but only of men and worldly matters, lack truth and they shall quickly be forgotten. Works that reveal God's glory, pervading all creation – these are full of truth, goodness and everything sacred.

The work that tells of the Divine truly sparkles and is immortal, always novel in its power to enchant the mind. Such works alone remind the heart that the universe is a great and holy festival, a mahotsava; such works dry up the sea of samsara, in which men are plunged.

However entertaining or accomplished or attractive a literary work might be, if it does not tell of Sri Hari and his legends that sanctify the world, it is like a puddle, which will draw crows but never swans. Rishis never read these, for Sages care only for the presence of the Lord and works that reveal him.

However, if a work contain the names of God and tell of his fame, both of which destroy sins – these the Saints are keen to hear, to expound and recite; why, even if there are mistakes of grammar and style in every line!

Even immaculate gyana, untouched by any ignorance, is dull if it does not glow with bhakti for Achyuta. How then will karma performed with desire or even nishkaama karma have any meaning until it is performed in a spirit of surrender and bhakti?

All the striving of varnasrama results only in fame and wealth. But listening to the names of the Lord and chanting them give a man constant devotion and remembrance of him.

The constant remembrance of the holy feet of Krishna destroys evil in a man's mind, the very tendency towards evil, and establishes the mind in peace. It purifies the entire being, blesses the man with love and knowledge of God, with experience of him, and with a spirit of renunciation.

Munis, you are fortunate! Install Hari in your hearts and worship him with flinchless devotion. He is the Soul, the Lord, always free, and there is none superior to him.

Because of you, Munis, I have been given this rare chance to narrate the *Bhagavata Purana*, the gospel of God, which I heard from the lips of the incomparable Sri Suka, in a company of several Rishis, who had gathered around Raja Parikshit, during his final vrata unto death.

Revered ones, now I have finished telling you this splendid Purana of the Lord's legends, which is, indeed, the finest work that a tongue can describe or an ear listen to.

If a man hears this Bhagavata for just a yaama, with devotion, or an even shorter time, or if he relates it to other men, he will sanctify his body and his spirit, himself and those that hear him. It shall be like bathing in the holiest tirtha, and not merely washing the body in some water.

He that listens to the Bhagavatam on Ekadasi and Dwadasi shall live long; he that reads the Bhagavatam on these days, while keeping a fast and meditating upon the Lord, shall be freed from all his sins.

He that keeps a vrata and reads the *Bhagavata Purana* at Puskara, Vraja or Dwaraka, shall not ever again experience fear of anything that exists in samsara.

Those that recite or hear this Purana will have the blessings of the Devas, Rishis, Siddhas, Pitrs, the Manus, all of whom will give them whatever their hearts desire.

He that studies this Purana receives exciting magical gifts, which usually only dwijas who master the three Vedas get – madhukulya, ghritakulya and payahkulya: the spontaneous flow of honey, ghee and milk.

A dwija who studies this Purana with concentration attains to mukti, the final condition that the Lord describes.

A brahmana who studies the *Bhagavata Purana* receives vigyana of the Atman; a kshatriya acquires a kingdom that extends from one sea to the next; a vaisya gains wealth beyond his dreams, and a sudra is set free from his every sin.

No other Shastra describes Hari repeatedly and with such bhakti as the *Bhagavata Purana* does. All the tales and anecdotes deal with a single Person – Bhagavan, God who pervades all things.

I salute that Achyuta, the pristine One, Un-born, Immortal; whose power creates, sustains and destroys the universe; whose glory cannot be described by Brahma, Indra, Shankara or any of the Gods.

I salute Him, the quintessential Chitta, the eternal, supreme God, the Antaryamin, in whom all the worlds and their entities – created by the nine forces of Prakriti that stir at his will – are founded.

I salute Vyasa's son Suka, who is an enlightened One, free of desire; but who emerged from his blissful samadhi to describe the lila of the Lord whose fascination is inexorable. From his compassion, Suka Deva gave us this *Bhagavata Purana*, this Book of God, which wipes away every taint of sin from the mind and lights the lamp of divine love and knowledge in the human heart.'

FINAL SALUTATIONS

SUTA SAID, 'I HYMN THE SUPREME GOD, WHOM BRAHMA, VARUNA, INDRA, Rudra, the Maruts and others extol with sacred praise and prayers, whom the masters of Sama praise with hymns from the Veda, the Vedangas, Pada, Karma and the Upanishads; whom Yogis find in their hearts, when their hearts have grown still; who is beyond comprehension, whose powers the hosts of Devas and Asuras do not begin to understand.

The breath of the Lord, the Divine Kuurma, protect you – the sigh that escaped him when the whirring of Mount Mandara upon his back, during the churning of the Kshirasagara, lulled him to sleep: the sacred breath that exists even today as the ebb and flow of the tide.

Let me tell you now about how many Puranas there are, and the passages they contain; about the relevance of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the laws laid down for making copies of the sacred text and distributing these; and of the benefits to be gained from the study of the Book of God.

The *Brahma Purana* has ten thousand verses; the *Padma Purana* fifty-five thousand; the *Vishnu Purana* twenty-three thousand; the *Siva Purana* twenty-four thousand;

The *Srimad Bhagavata Purana* has eighteen thousand verses; the *Narada Purana* twenty-five thousand; the *Markandeya Purana* nineteen thousand, and the *Agni Purana* ten thousand and five hundred passages;

The *Bhavishya Purana* has fourteen thousand five hundred verses; the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* eighteen thousand; the *Linga Purana* eleven thousand;

The *Varaha Purana* has twenty-four thousand verses; the *Skanda Purana* eighty-one thousand and one hundred; the *Vamana Purana*, ten thousand;

The *Kuurma Purana* has seventeen thousand passages; the *Matsya*, fourteen thousand; the *Garuda*, nineteen thousand, and the *Brahmanda Purana* contains twelve thousand verses.

Thus, four hundred thousand verses do all the Maha Puranas together contain; of these, eighteen thousand belong to this Bhagavatam.

The Lord Mahavishnu himself first revealed this Bhagavatam to Brahma, who sat within his lotus sprouted from Narayana's navel, and trembled with fear of becoming entangled in the wheel of samsara.

Every narrative of the Bhagavatam nurtures the spirit of renunciation in men's hearts; and the legends of the Lord's lila are always like amrita, to Rishis and Devas alike.

This is the essence of all Vedanta, based upon the fundamental truth of Advaita, and it describes the unity of the Atman and the Brahman. Its final purpose is no less than the attainment of moksha.

The pious one that makes a gift of the Bhagavatam on the paurnima day of the month of Bhadrapada, giving it away upon a golden stand, shall attain to the most lofty destiny.

Only before wise men discover the *Bhagavata Purana* shall they hold the other Puranas in esteem. So transcendent are its qualities that it easily outstrips the rest.

This Bhagavatam is the quintessence of Vedanta; what wonder, then, that one who studies the Purana feels no interest towards any other book or scripture?

Even as the Ganga is among rivers, Achyuta among Gods, Sambhu among the bhaktas of Vishnu, is this Bhagavata among Puranas.

O Dwijas, like Kasi among tirthas is the Bhagavata among all the Puranas, unrivalled.

Srimad Bhagavatam is beloved of the Lord's bhaktas. It exalts the way of the Paramahamsas; it tells of the condition without ahamkara, in which gyana, vairagya and bhakti swell. He that listens to, studies and meditates upon its teachings will find absolute devotion to God, and mukti from samsara.

We meditate upon this supreme truth, this untainted, pristine, sorrowless fire of enlightenment, which the Lord lit in the heart of Brahma; which Brahma gave to Narada, who imparted it to Veda Vyasa, who transmitted it to Suka Deva, who related it to Raja Parikshit.

Salutation to You, O Vaasudeva, universal witness, who in your mercy taught the *Bhagvata Purana* to Brahma, when the Creator sought freedom from samsara.

Salutations to Suka, greatest of Yogis, why the Brahman incarnate, who restored the spirit of Parikshit, when that king had been stung by the serpent samsara.

Lord, O master of souls, bless us that, regardless of what we are born as, over and over, let us always have bhakti for your holy feet.

Naamasankeertanam yasya sarvapaapapranashanam; Pranamo dukhashamanastam namami Hari param.

I worship Hari, the Supreme One, singing whose names all our sins are destroyed, and prostrating before whom we are rescued from every distress.'

HARI AUM TAT SAT.

AUM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTIHI.

The second volume of the *Bhagavata Purana* deals almost entirely with the life of Krishna, the eighth avatara of Lord Vishnu.

Ramesh Menon was born in 1951 in New Delhi. He has retold the *Siva Purana* and the *Devi Bhagavatam*, and written modern renderings of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. He has also translated the *Bhagavad Gita*.